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A TERROR-HAUNTED SPELLBINDER
OF EXQUISITE ROMANCE AND EXOTIC EVIL

MOON- DRAGON

A NOVEL OF ROMANTIC SUSPENSE BY
NOËL VREELAND CARTER



MOONDRAGON—
WHERE THE MARRIAGE OF
EAST AND WEST GAVE BIRTH
TO UNEARTHLY BEAUTY
AND UNHOLY TERROR

From the moment lovely, dark-haired Deirdre Fennora came to the manor of Moondragon on the wild coast of Ireland, she found herself in a bizarre and extravagant realm far removed from the Victorian world she knew.

Awaiting her in this place of oriental splendor and occidental intrigue was kindness in the form of the bewitching mistress of the manor...passion in the amorous advances of a dashing soldier of fortune ...mingled dread and desire in the overwhelming presence of the powerful, tormented Moondragon heir...danger in the twisted affection of the hulking half-wit who ran wild on the vast estate...and above all, monstrous menace in the tantalizing lure of the fabulous necklace that gleamed on the neck of a woman long dead and lit the way to the grave for the living....

MOON- DRAGON

a novel of enthralling romantic suspense

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**In loving memory of my mother,
Charlotte Helen Rheinwald Vreeland,
and for
Henry Mazzeo, Jr., who is a
FRIEND**

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MOONDRAGON

by

Noël Vreeland Carter



A SIGNET BOOK
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TIMES MIRROR

*The House in
Merrion Square*

What beckoning ghost, along the moonlight shade
Invites my step, and points to yonder glade?

—Alexander Pope

I suppose if I had to decide when it all began, I should have to go back to that strange, chill, cloudless January night in Dublin, for that was the night on which I realized, at long last, that my father truly was dying and that I soon would be alone for the first time in my life.

He had been ill so long; there had been so much pain and suffering, yet through it all we had both fought so hard, held so tightly to each other, grasping what pitiful months of life remained that it had almost seemed for a time that we had conquered death. We learned to live together in a sort of limbo where nothing existed except ourselves and the world we had created within the narrow confines of his invalid's room.

And so it was that with the fateful picture of my father's dying eyes before me, dull and unknowing, I came to stand, on that terrible January night in 1883, behind the lace curtains of our long parlor windows looking out upon the hoarfrost that glittered on the grass in the flickering gaslight of Merrion Square across the cobbled road from our house.

A dog ran quickly across the square, nameless mongrel, skeletal as the bare winter trees, leaving in his wake an irregular line of dark blotches in the sparkling rime. Watching the lone, homeless creature pass, going God knew where in his fruitless quest for food and warmth, brought to my eyes all

the pent-up tears that for months I had not dared to shed. And so I stood at the window clutching the edges of the curtain, and cried for us all—my long-dead mother, my beloved father, my poor self caught in the loneliness and agony of his long dying, and, yes, even for that poor mongrel dog wandering the chill damp night alone.

How long I stood thus, I have no idea, but finally there came a moment when tears no longer fell. I remember beginning to dry my burning eyes against the delicate lace of the curtain and thinking better of it. Instead I groped in my pocket for a handkerchief, dried my eyes, and sighed, feeling infinitely sad but somehow the better for having released some of my long-suppressed emotions.

Once more I parted the curtains for a last look out into the night before returning to my bedside vigil. The paw prints of the passing dog had frosted over, and once more the grass was a perfect crystalline carpet under the sputtering glare of the gaslight.

Suddenly, just as I was about to turn away, another figure—human this time—made its way across the grassy square, walking diagonally toward the very window in which I stood. The woman, for so I had detected her to be, despite the oddity of her garments (which were unlike any I had ever seen), came toward me quite purposefully, walking with an odd, mincing gait of tiny slippers that seemed too small to bear the burden of her body's weight, much less that of the long, stiff, heavily embroidered robe she wore.

As she approached, I could see her young oriental face quite clearly; delicate it was, round as the moon, and nearly as pale, with arched black brows, long almond-shaped eyes as black as obsidian, and hair as straight and glossy as the mane of a stallion. When she reached the curb just below the window in which I stood fascinated, she looked up at me quite steadily for a moment, and then, reaching up with tiny fingers, the tips of which appeared to be encased in long golden claws, she pulled open the neck of her robe to reveal the most exquisite necklace I had ever seen.

Around her pale, lovely throat coiled a golden dragon fashioned by the jeweler's art, of such fine, flexible scales that it writhed like a living thing on the woman's neck with every breath she drew. She raised her throat toward me in a motion of infinite grace, allowing the light from the gas fixture by our front door to illuminate the magnificent treasure more fully.

I gazed transfixed by the gorgeousness of what I saw. As the body of the golden dragon coiled around her neck, so the tail of the creature coiled around its own neck, forming a circlet. Each of the dragon's four claws clutched a large uncut jewel. Two of these bejeweled claws thrust upward, resting high upon the woman's throat, while the other two stretched out and down to either side of the animal's head, which rested mouth downward on her bared chest. Every minute scale was enameled in shades of blue ranging from deep midnight to pale silver.

But the greatest beauty of that fantastic golden necklace was yet to be revealed. Looking up at me with soft black eyes, an odd, mystifying smile on her lovely oriental face, the young woman opened her robe still further with those tiny clawed fingers, showing me that from the open mouth of the golden dragon there hung a huge baroque pearl of such whiteness and luster that I could only stare in wonder at its unfathomable beauty. I gazed thus for a long moment; then instinctively my eyes moved upward, over the tops of the bare trees in the square, toward the full silver moon overhead. Through my brain ran a phrase in a language I had never heard, and yet, as I looked upon the moon high above me, the words took on meaning, and I knew what this exotic, lovely woman had wanted me to understand: that I had seen—for good or ill I knew not—*the Dragon of the Moon*.

The instant that that phrase came into my mind, I looked back down to where the figure stood, but she had gone in the few seconds during which I had looked away. Just then the doctor recalled me to my father's bedside. Puzzled and vaguely abstracted by what I had seen, I turned to mount the stairs and resume my sad vigil.

It was not until I had reached the upper hall that I realized the single, strangest thing of all the strange occurrences in the preceding few minutes of my life: Unlike the nameless mongrel dog before her, the lovely, mysterious oriental woman had left no footprints upon the hoarfrost carpet of the square.

In the long dreary months that followed, I sat by the window in my father's book-lined bedroom looking out over that never-changing little square, touched, as my heart was touched, by the damp fingers of a winter that seemed never to end.

Occasionally life would stir in the tiny park: a few hardy sparrows would flutter in the bare trees, a child would skip

lightly across the dormant brown grass, outpacing her nanny with cries of glee at the promise of warmth and tea and hot buttered bread waiting at home. Then, too, there was always Mr. Kelly, the postman, making his unhurried way across the square and along our street to bring what little contact with the outside world yet remained to us.

And just as, occasionally, life stirred in the square upon which I so often turned my gaze, so life also stirred for brief moments in my dying father. I never knew from minute to minute when those dull, passive eyes would turn to me in recognition, looking at me out of his pale, wasted face with love and yearning.

These few lucid minutes, whenever they occurred, were precious to me, for while others—his doctor, the nurses I had hired—might minister to the poor wreck of his body (which after all was only his mortal outer shell), I and I alone filled the dearest and most sacred office of all—minister to his mind; for it was his mind that had made my father great, his mind and the loving heart that beat within his breast. He had been, until the terrible onset of this wasting illness, the foremost classical historian of his generation, a great scholar and beloved teacher whose writings were renowned over all of Europe and the empire. His lectures had been delivered before packed, hushed audiences, not only here in Trinity College, but in nearly every leading university in Britain and on the continent. None could fault either his brilliant scholarship or the splendid voice with which his talks were delivered.

Now, sadly, that beautiful, mellifluous voice with its gentle Irish lilt was forever still, victim of the creeping cancer that first attacked his lungs so many months before and, moving steadily upward, was slowly robbing him of breath, voice, mind, and life. So, as the days crawled by, each tiny lucid moment became a special joy to me, for it was then that I could help ease his terrible death agony. I would smile, though cheer was hard for either of us to dissemble, for we had long ago got beyond the stage where we needed to lie to each other about his dying. Instead, I would read to him from his favorite books, scholarly journals, or from the newspapers. More especially, I would read some of the scores of letters that came to him from all over the country and, indeed, from all over the world. As the months passed, their numbers dwindled, but still they did come, letters of comfort and condolence and praise from men who were his colleagues, or from those who had once been his students and

were now graying, bearded men with professorships and doctorates of their own.

Reading those many letters of kind affection and reminiscence was terribly difficult, for they brought back so forcefully the happy days of my childhood, when we three, my parents and I, had been a family full of love, fulfillment, and worldly success. Father, however, enjoyed hearing those warm, nostalgic letters so much that no matter what the cost to myself, I read them to him with great care, stopping the moment his mind slipped into unconsciousness, and ever ready to continue again with a smile the very next time he came back to himself.

The effect of the constant strain upon my nerves during the three final months of my father's life was vast and awful. I was subject to long periods of depression during which I brooded constantly upon death and pain and the miseries of this life. There was but fitful sleep for me, snatched in guilty minutes of druglike slumber in the big chair by his bedroom windows. Had I not been chided by our maid, the doctor, and even by my father's cool but dutiful nurses, I doubt if I should have eaten or changed my clothing for days on end. Since I saw no visitors, and rarely, if ever, left the confines of his room, let alone the house, I had become but a pallid ghost of my former robust self, slender to the point of actual frailty from lack of sufficient food or sleep.

The only strength left to me was the strength of will that my deep love for my father gave me. All that strength I used to try to make his last living minutes worthwhile. In all that time I never once gave thought to myself and to the fact that in weeks, days, perhaps only hours, my whole life would have changed and I would be alone in the world at last—a twenty-six-year-old spinster of modest means and without the slightest idea of what I should do with the rest of my life.

That inevitable night of change finally came in March of 1883. I had been reading to him—a poem in Greek that had always been one of his favorites. As I finished the last line, I looked up from the page and into his dear eyes, hoping that the smile on my face convincingly masked my inner sorrow. He twisted his poor shriveled mouth into the semblance of an answering smile, his eyes brightened unnaturally for an instant, and then, like the extinguished flame of a candle, his life guttered out. I sat for many minutes looking down incomprehendingly at his lifeless body. It seemed impossible that at long last it should be over. In one second of time, that

which had been for over sixty years a living, loving man was now no more than meaningless clay.

With that realization—that what was left of my father was merely clay—I arose, abruptly, from the startled reaction of the night nurse who had been dozing in a chair by the door, and walked to the windows.

"My father has died, I think."

The woman rushed to his side and examined him.

"Aye," she murmured, crossing herself, and then turned on me with all the outspoken impudence of her class. "Shameful girl, have ye no closed the poor man's eyes? 'Tis the office of a daughter surely."

"Fetch the doctor, Nurse Rogan, and close his eyes yourself." My father is not in that lifeless thing, I might have said. All that is and ever was of my father is here in me and on these book-lined walls, in the hearts and minds of those countless men who have read his works—his ideas—and who will read them in the years to come. My father is in my mind and heart and in the minds and hearts of all who loved him. All these things and more I might have said, but that superstitious nurse would never have understood, would have condemned me for my seeming callousness.

Instead, I said nothing more, but rather turned away toward the windows in order to avoid the figure in the bed. The curtains were parted, the shade carelessly left up beyond the onset of nightfall, so that in the black mirror formed by the combination of darkened sky, glass, and dimly lit room, I saw reflected the very image of bed and man that I had sought to escape. That figure, whatever it had been, was not any longer the father I had loved, and I did not wish to look upon it again.

With one quick, thoughtless thrust, I reached for the sash and opened the window, at once removing the offending reflection and filling the room with a cleansing draught of cold winter air. The gas flame sputtered out, leaving the room in utter darkness, but I cared not. Leaning out the window, I took a deep, deep breath of the pure, chilly air, wondering, as I did, if my father's captured spirit, now freed from the mortal body that had housed it for so long, had blown out the window on a gust of wind. Perhaps even now he was riding high and free, outward bound toward the moon and stars.

That fanciful thought, wild and romantic, coupled with the intoxicating effect of the fresh cold air in my lungs, filled me with a strange sensation of euphoria. With keen eyes and

heightened senses I looked out upon the cobbled street and bare, gaslit Merrion Square. There below me on the grass, appearing shadowless in a circle of flickering gaslight, stood the same lovely, mysterious oriental woman I had seen on that awful January night nearly three months earlier. For one brief second her eyes met mine, and I knew that 'neath the fantastic embroidered robe she wore, the Dragon of the Moon writhed and glittered upon her naked breast.

She smiled a smile that seemed meant to reassure and comfort me. I nodded slowly in reply, but as I did, the sound of an approaching horse and carriage drew my attention away from her strange form. The doctor was arriving to confirm the fact I already knew, to sign the certificate and put a proper period to my father's ended life.

When once again my eyes returned to the pool of light in the square, she had vanished, as I knew she would, for of course she had never really been there.

As the doctor had with his death certificate, the minister with his prayers, the dean of Trinity College with his eulogy, and the mortician with his burial, so I preformed my last obsequies for my dead father: the disposition of his papers and books.

Those tasks had now been completed, and suddenly I felt truly alone in that large empty house—emptier now than ever, with its gaping shelves, denuded cupboards, and turned-out drawers. I had up until now given little thought to what I would do with the rest of my life. Certainly I would pursue some scholarly researches of my own. I was too much my father's daughter for classical history and literature not to hold great interest for me, but surely, I thought, that must not be the whole of my life. Above all, I was a woman, no longer young, perhaps, but I certainly still had the right to hope that there might yet be some personal happiness in store for me.

There had been chances once to meet young men, to dance and to flirt. Two suitors had proposed: Liam Macpherson, when I was barely nineteen and too young; Jeremy Fox when I was twenty-three and caught up in the excitement of being my father's secretary on a lecture tour of Europe and the Near East. Perhaps someday I would receive a third proposal—the right one and at the right time.

The clock on the mantel struck four, and at just that moment the maid entered to inform me that I was awaited in

the parlor. I had forgotten that a visitor was expected, and so it was a somewhat breathless entrance that I made to greet my father's old friend Professor Alexander McNally.

"Dear Professor McNally, how kind of you to come. I have so wanted to thank you personally for the wonderful things you have written about Father. Your words, all the more because I know that they come from your heart, have been such a comfort."

My visitor shook his silver head sadly. "I only regret not seeing him during those final weeks, I know he would not—indeed, could not—have visitors, but the burden that that put on you, Deirdre, has been enormous. How I wish I could have lightened your load."

His sympathy was just the wrong thing at that moment. Suddenly, without warning, I burst into uncontrollable sobbing, the very thing I had so carefully guarded against doing before friends and servants, no matter how hard or how often I might cry into my pillow at night. There was no help for it. I simply could not stop, and so my dear friend, embarrassed though he must have been, came and sat beside me on the sofa, taking me in his arms and comforting me just as gently as my own father had done so many times in my girlhood, when the simpler troubles of youth had seemed so very heavy on my young shoulders.

"Oh, professor, forgive me," I sobbed. "It's only that I've just finished sorting out and disposing of the last of Father's things. There is nothing left to do—except to decide what to be done with me. That's the hardest part of all, I expect."

His arms tightened around my shoulders. His whispered words of comfort took on an intensity that made me realize he was clumsily attempting to make love to me and was actually beginning to make a declaration of such passionate feelings as I, perhaps naively, would not have thought possible in a man of his years.

At last, he said, he was free to speak, although he had intended to wait until my mourning had passed, but he was a man, human as any other, and could not hold me in his arms so tenderly without his deep emotions getting the better of him. He did not, he said, expect an answer just then, but surely I would allow him to hope.

Such were the sentiments that came tumbling from his lips in that terrible excess of passion that had taken hold of him and which I would scarcely have believed him to harbor within his breast. I mastered my surprise and embarrassment

sufficiently to pull away from his grasp, and, collecting my bewildered thoughts as best I could, I tried to find a way—not too unkind—to put him off and hasten his departure.

"Surely, Deirdre," he persisted, "it cannot come as a complete surprise to you that my feelings for you have grown deeper with the passing years? I have often fancied that you return my affection in no small measure. You have always been so happy to see me, so unaffected and unselfconscious in the warmth you have shown me. We have shared so many interests in common. You . . . you have always led me to believe that I was important to you."

"And so you are, so you are, my dear professor. The happiest hours of my life have been spent right here in this very house with you and Father. But . . ."

I strove to find some kind thing to say that would neither hurt nor unduly encourage my dear old friend, for in truth, at that moment I was still so taken aback by the events of the afternoon that I knew not what my ultimate answer to his sudden proposal might be.

" . . . But, my dear Professor McNally, I have so long devoted myself to my father that at this very moment, with my life in such turmoil, it is terribly unsettling to receive your generous, flattering, but so unexpected declaration. Cannot you understand that it leaves me quite confounded? I cannot begin to think what answer to give you."

"You must have some idea of your feelings toward me," he protested.

"Indeed I have. You are a precious, lovely friend—kind beyond words; a fine and upright companion for any woman. More than that I cannot, dare not, say. I must take some time to reorient my thinking and contemplate the idea that he who has always been my dear old friend might one day be my husband, my—I blush to say it—my lover."

"Forgive me, my lovely child. I should never have spoken at this time. I realize that now, but holding you in my arms as I did, I quite lost all control. Please forgive me."

"Of course I will, if you, dear sir, will forgive my perhaps overdelicate sensibilities." I took him affectionately by the arm, and with the pretense of a lightheartedness I did not feel, I escorted him out of the parlor and into the front hall.

"When shall I hear from you, Deirdre?" he pursued once more, emboldened by my manner, which I had only intended as kindness.

"Please be patient, dear Professor McNally," I pleaded.

"Would it not be proper, under the altered circumstances, for you to address me by my Christian name, Deirdre?"

"Of course. It would be quite proper, uh . . . Alexander."

"I shall hear from you soon?"

How I blush now to think of the unceremonious push I gave him as the dear man, hat in hand, attempted to linger, with all the clumsiness of a lovesick puppy, upon my doorstep.

"Please do give me time," I urged. "I promise you shall have some word within the week. Until then, farewell, Pro . . . Alexander."

I shut the door upon his earnest, rosy face and ran, half in tears at the pity of it all, half in laughter at the ludicrousness of it, up the stairs and into the safe haven of my bedroom.

The room, growing shadowy in the late-afternoon light, was so still and comforting. I sat for some time looking into my dressing-table mirror. He is so old, I thought. Still, it was a proposal, the third and perhaps the last I'd ever receive. And it was an answer. At least I would not be alone; at least, not for a while, at any rate.

I stared into the mirror, surveying the face before me, taking stock of just what that countenance of mine had to offer. Even in that dimly lit room I was as pale as death, for though less fitful, my sleep was still disturbed. I rarely slept more than a few hours early each morning. Then, too, the raven blackness of my hair, once lustrous and full, hanging lank and dull as it did now, drained color from my skin. My hazel eyes, from lack of sleep, were unnaturally large and dark, ringed beneath with great purple circles. My lips, so broad and rosy in my youth, were bloodless now, and grim. In short, I looked quite dreadful.

Still, at the thought of Alexander McNally, fifty-six years a bachelor and ardent as a boy for the love of me, I could not help but smile. I might not be, after all, quite the ugly duckling I thought I had become. Perhaps I might be pretty still, once I had taken the trouble to try to restore some of my lost looks. With something of the coquettishness of my early twenties, I made a moue and tried to pinch some color into my faded cheeks.

As I was thus engaged before the mirror, I became aware of a figure standing some few feet behind me in the unlit room. It was barely visible in the waning light, and at first I thought it must be Eileen impudently spying on her mistress,

as I am told so many young maids of her class are wont to do. Then, even as I was about to turn and fling my hairbrush at her motionless form, I realized—frozen with dread—that no brazen Irish servant girl stood behind me in the shadows. In a flash of intuition I recognized for what it was the slim robed figure of the oriental woman who twice before had companioned me in a moment of great sorrow or turmoil.

Even as I once more stood on the brink of a great change in my life she had come to me, and was in fact closer now than ever before. Frozen still, I remained in my seat before the mirror, my eyes fixed upon her reflection before me. While I watched thus, she glided forward as effortlessly as if she floated on a cloud, her face suddenly becoming visible in the mirror as she leaned forward toward my shoulder. All the while, her eyes never left the reflection of mine in the glass. Slowly, as if in warning, she shook her graceful head. A small, fleeting smile passed over her lips. Then, with her soft, unblinking black eyes still fixed on mine, she gently brushed my pale cheek with an unfelt kiss of her coral lips and faded like smoke from before my very sight.

It was many long moments before I dared—in fact, was able—to move, but finally I gained courage, and with shaking hands managed to light the gas, filling my darkened bedroom with the comforting glare of flickering yellow light. This had been quite an afternoon, I reflected wryly; within hours I had finished my last tasks for my dead father, received the third marriage proposal upon which I had so happily speculated earlier in the day, and had had a third visit from what must surely be the strangest ghost ever to haunt a respectable Irish house.

In more senses than one, I stood poised upon a brink. God alone knew what the morrow would bring.

With Never a Backward Glance

For winter's rains and ruins are over,

And time remembered is grief forgotten,
And frosts are slain and flowers begotten,
And in green underwood and cover

Blossom by blossom the spring begins.

—Swinburne

Merrion Square, with its solid rows of elegant Georgian and early Victorian row houses, glowed green in the sunlight on the early April morning that was to prove so momentous a day in my life.

Spring was suddenly in the air. I felt it from the second I awoke out of the first deep, dreamless sleep I had had in months. Eileen, cheery as a sparrow, was opening wide my bedroom windows as I opened my eyes. Breakfast was at hand, and I ate of it heartily, relishing with zest the varied scents of spring grass, hot buttered toast, fresh sunlit air, and rich, tarry China tea, all of which assailed my nostrils in a frenzy of mingled aromas. Birds sang, children laughed in the square outside, and from my bed I could see through the gently wafting white lace curtains a glorious blue sky and the greening upper branches of the trees across the way. Something was going to happen today—something wonderful.

It was as if the events of the last few months had been but the first act of a drama; last evening's events, the curtain lines; and this morning, after a refreshing night-long intermission, I was about to take part in a bright new second act written by Fate especially for me. In that lighthearted mood I thought as I began to dress of Eileen symbolically raising the

curtain and exiting. Heroine upon the bare stage! What was next? Enter who?

Enter Mr. Kelly, the postman, whistling a sprightly air as he made his way jauntily across the square and toward our house, which happened to be the first on his route around the park. Hastily drawing on a dressing gown over my camisole and petticoats, I ran to the window and greeted him just as he approached our steps.

"Top o' the morning to you, Mr. Kelly. Spring has finally arrived in Merrion Square, has it not?"

"Indeed it has, Miss Fennora, and it's happy I am to see you look so blooming after your long sorrow."

"Thank you kindly," I replied. "Is there any mail for me this morning? Anything special, that is?" I added hopefully, and, if the truth were known, expectantly.

He wet his thumb with great show and flicked carefully through the top few envelopes in the bundle of mail he had in his hand, then looked up at me, squinting against the bright morning light.

"Oh, aye, there's something special. At least, any letter that's threepenny weight of vellum before the ink and crested seal's been added would be special to me. Add to that a title and a name with an odd, foreign sound to it, and I'd say it's special enough for a royal duchess herself."

"Still," he went on, teasing me now, as he had so often done in my youth, when he knew I was awaiting letters from some beau or other, "still, it's addressed to Miss Deirdre Fennora, who, though she may not be a royal duchess, is still the queen of Merrion Square as much as ever she was at the age of ten years and I first became her majesty's royal mail carrier."

I laughed in delight at his reminder of our old game.

"Oh, do deliver it, then," I exclaimed. "I'm not yet dressed, or I'd be down in a trice to snatch it from your grasp myself." I pulled my head in just as Mr. Kelly rang the bell below.

"Eileen, Mavis," I called down the stairs, "one of you bring up the mail to me. At once, do you hear?"

I whirled back into my room, and with some effort managed to be sitting with proper dignity at my dressing table, engaged, nonchalantly I hoped, in brushing my hair by the time Eileen came breathlessly through the door.

"Put the mail here beside me and take the breakfast things away. Be quick about it!"

"Yes, miss," she murmured, eyeing me with curiosity. Being rather new in the household, she had never seen me in the lighter, more abrupt mood that had been characteristic of my personality in the days before my father became ill. I could not help but be somewhat self-conscious, knowing this, and so I snapped at her imperiously to cover my embarrassment and impatience.

"Do be gone, girl. I'm in no mood to have you gawking at me like a loony." She fled hastily, dishes rattling all over the breakfast tray. "And don't chip the china," I called after her in my severest tone, only to burst into gales of laughter at her confusion, once the door had closed. How very full of the devil I felt all of a sudden, hectoring the servants in that same manner I had had when I took over management of the house for my father so many years before. It had taken some severe reprimands from him to break me of the habit, but now, here I was, fourteen years later, returning to my old bad habits with mischievous relish.

Still laughing, I turned to the little stack of letters that Eileen had placed upon the dressing table at my left hand. I stopped laughing quite abruptly, however, upon examination of the heavy vellum envelope Mr. Kelly had described. The hand in which it was addressed was firm, graceful, feminine, and totally unfamiliar. With a certain sense of excited anticipation, I turned the letter over to read the return address. The smile faded from my lips as I stared in amazement and utter disbelief, for, engraved above a huge red seal bearing the device of a dragon rampant, bearing an orb in its paws, was the following:

Lady Elizabeth Cheng
Moondragon
Glencannis
Cork

Needless to say, it was with trembling fingers that I broke the seal and read the contents of that fateful letter.

Moondragon

March 30, 1883

My dearest child,
You cannot imagine my shock and sorrow upon

reading of your dear father's long illness and passing in the recent Dublin newspapers, a packet of which has just reached me this very day.

It overwhelms me with a dreadful sense of guilt to be reminded in such a final manner of just how long I have been remiss in my correspondence with Dr. Fennora. That I should have been so careless of our old friendship not only puts me to shame but grieves me deeply, for had I known he was so ill, I might have, for Charlotte's sake, been able to be of some assistance to you. If nothing else, I would at least have made the journey to Dublin (though I have not done so in many years) in order to be of some comfort to you and to say a last farewell to a man for whom I have ever had nothing but the greatest respect and affection, ever since our first meeting nearly thirty years ago, when I had the pleasure of being matron of honor at your mother's wedding.

It must be a comfort to you at this sad time to remember how happy your parents were in their marriage. While now you feel so deeply the loss of him (and, surely, all over again that of your mother), try to take comfort in the fact that he was fortunate in his choice of wife and career, rich in worldly success, love, and friends. Few, looking back on a lifetime, could have as much to rejoice in and as little to regret as had your dear father.

But these, though heartfelt, are poor words of comfort when compared to the eloquent wisdom of the many eulogies and memorials that you must, of necessity, have heard in recent days; therefore, Deirdre, my child, I shall come swiftly to the reason, other than to condole with you in your loss, for my writing to you. Believing as I do that death is a finality and an eternal end, my thoughts at times like these dwell ever with the living left behind in this world, for as I know well, the wound of losing a loved one is long in healing.

I can well imagine that this is a time of great upheaval in your life. You surely face great decisions now, decisions that should not be made lightly or in haste. Therefore, it occurs to me that some months away from Dublin, from your house, with its recent

unhappy associations, and even from well-meaning but solemn-faced friends who make the slow process of forgetting all the more difficult, would be very good for you at this time.

I know that you have not met me since you were a wee child and I a young woman, but still, if you could come to me at Moondragon, we could renew our long-ago acquaintance. It would allow me, also, to repay in some small measure, to her daughter, the great love and affection I received at Charlotte's hands many years ago when I lost my husband. So you see that if you come, I should not only be happy but also grateful for a chance to repay an old debt.

You will be well distracted from your cares here. No lovelier spot exists in all Ireland than the great expanse of Bantry Bay (upon which I gaze from time to time as I compose this letter). Its high cliffs and rockbound shores are breathtaking. Here it is already warm, and spring has been upon us for weeks. Summer follows in no time at all. I think you could not help but love it as I do. Certainly your parents did on their visit here years ago.

I'll say only one thing more. I, as do all his friends, lament your father's passing, but I beg also to remind you that as St. Mark says: "There is a past which is gone forever. But there is a future which is still our own."

Perhaps here at Moondragon you may be able to gain a perspective of the past and in comfort and leisure begin to think wisely of that future which is still your own.

Do come at once, and plan a long visit. I await your reply with eager anticipation of a happy acquiescence.

I remain yours affectionately,
Elizabeth Cheng

Slowly I reread the letter, marveling once more, as I had at first sight of the return address, at the coincidence of the name "Moondragon" and the strange, beautiful necklace worn by my fair oriental "ghost."

I had thought all along that she was a ghost. After all, what other explanation was there, other than that I was going insane (which I knew I was not)? There had been none that

made any sense—at least until the arrival of this letter set me to thinking. Now, upon reflection, I understood what must be the true explanation of the vision, and felt at last that I had hit upon the real truth of the matter. Somehow, probably triggered by the constant strain and loneliness of the past few months, the latent clairvoyance in me, a legacy from my mother and her mother, which had so long lain dormant that I had all but forgotten it, had reawakened. It was my own suddenly active clairvoyant powers that had caused the three visions of the exotic Chinese woman and her spectacular necklace, the Dragon of the Moon.

Yet, I reasoned, there was actually nothing of the supernatural about these visions. In fact, the rationale was quite simple: what my conscious mind had long ago forgotten, that “other mind” that slumbers within us all knew well. “It” remembered my mother’s old friend Lady Cheng and her estate called Moondragon, and by that strange inherited pre-sense of mine was trying to warn me of what lay ahead; perhaps even held it out as a comforting promise of relief and rest ahead after my long ordeal with Father.

It was understandable, I supposed, that I should not have recognized the visions for what they actually were. After all, I had not had a clairvoyant experience—“the sight” as it is commonly called—since I was a child. Then they had frightened me. Their passing had been a relief, and I had quickly forgotten the experiences, never having any reason to suppose that the ability to “see” would ever return. This morning, I admitted to myself, playing the devil’s advocate, that I had known something was going to happen from the second I awoke. Such things had happened to me often throughout my life, but so had they to countless others. It was surely not part of my returning clairvoyance; merely a common premonition. Premonitions, one could live with—even enjoy; but to think that my clairvoyance was returning to haunt me, so to speak, might be more than I could bear.

Well, I would have to bear with it! Upon realistic reflection, I realized, trepidations aside, that my visions had indeed returned. Still, I reasoned, no harm had been done; curiously enough, they had not really frightened me, but rather I had been able to view these recent experiences from the first with an odd detachment and only vague concern, the result, I assumed, of the far greater concerns weighing upon me at the time. In retrospect, I could have no reason not to be grateful to my lovely Chinese vision. After all, had she not attempted

to forewarn me of the timely invitation to escape from Dublin and all the unpleasant pressures and associations it now held for me? It was hardly the fault of my unconscious mind if the conscious one had not interpreted it aright.

But actually, clairvoyance aside, there was really never, from the moment I first read Lady Cheng's letter, any question in my mind but that I would go to Moondragon—indeed, that I was meant to go to Moondragon. It was then, in that sudden flash of intuition, that I had first realized the return of my clairvoyance.

Moondragon was as inevitable as death—not a pleasant analogy, to be sure—but while it might fall rather short of heaven, it could hardly be hell. I had had enough of hell in the past year to last my natural life. Such were my rather flippant thoughts as I finished dressing on that early April morning and, letter in hand, fairly skipped downstairs to the library in order to begin drafting a letter of acceptance to Lady Elizabeth Cheng of Moondragon, Glencannis, County Cork.

The sight of bare bookshelves in the library had a momentarily depressing effect upon my spirits, but the sunlight beyond the curtains splashing down on the fresh spring greens of our little back garden soon distracted me, and I was in a pleasant frame of mind once more.

Before sitting down to my little writing desk by the window to frame a reply to my invitation, I stepped out into the garden and, regardless of the dust, sat upon the step to consider what I might recall of the lady who was so soon to be my hostess. Looking back over the years, I was able, after some effort, to remember a few of the particulars of Lady Cheng's life as I had occasionally overheard them being discussed by my parents. I knew that she had been at school with my mother here in Dublin sometime in the mid to late 1840's. She herself was Welsh-Irish and had come from somewhere in the northwest.

She had married quite young, and there had been something odd about the man she had married—certainly his family name was odd in itself—but he had been very wealthy, a baronet, and was considered quite a catch by her family, who, though of good breeding, had "seen better days," as the saying goes. The way or ways in which her late husband had been "odd" still escaped me, despite my repeated efforts to recall. But it hardly mattered, since the man was

long dead and hardly likely, despite my recent experiences, to pay me a visit. The only other particular that I could recall to mind was the fact that though she was widowed early, she never remarried and had chosen to remain in that remote place where her husband's ancestors had settled generations earlier. If memory served, there had been a child of the marriage, though whether it had survived or not, I could only guess.

I remembered too, that once, some years ago, my father had heard from her and said that she seemed contented with her lot in life. At that time he had mentioned in passing that he and my mother had once visited her at Moondragon (though whether he had at that time mentioned the house by its name, I could not actually say) and claimed that their visit, while brief, had been eventful. He would never elaborate on that cryptic remark, and I had soon lost all curiosity concerning her.

However, whatever had been "eventful" during that one visit, the two young women had kept up an active correspondence until the death of my mother brought it to an unfortunate halt. The result of that sorrowful occurrence had been an eventual falling away to nothing of the contact between our two houses, even as Lady Cheng had lamented in her letter to me. Anyway, thanks to her loving affection for and memory of my mother, the link of friendship was to be reaffirmed and continued into the second generation. It pleased me to think that my mother would wish it to be so.

That brought to my mind another thought: how pleasant it would be to talk with someone who had known my mother in her girlhood and might tell me more of her than the twelve early years of my life and Father's few conversations about her—due to the painful, never-healed wound that her death represented to him—were able to provide.

And so, after a brief, relaxing stroll along the garden paths and much searching of my memory, I reentered the library and sat down to the desk. There were several abortive attempts, but at last I began in earnest to draft a fitting reply to the gracious invitation I had received from the mistress of Moondragon.

The next few days, while awaiting a reply to my letter, which, hopefully, would contain suggestions as to how best to make my journey, were spent in a continual fever of preparation and excited anticipation. On the very next morning after the arrival of Lady Cheng's invitation, I set out to visit the

salon of my couturiere in Grafton Street. Time was of the essence, for as it was, my orders would keep her dressmakers busy night and day. Although I had already ordered and received several black mourning dresses suitable for the spring and summer, my wardrobe was lacking in the proper attire for formal dining and evening entertainments. It was unthinkable that Lady Cheng did not dress for dinner. It was equally unthinkable that I not wear mourning or at least half-mourning for a minimum of three months, and so by way of compromise with my own sensibilities and what might be those of my hostess, I ordered only one evening gown in black and the rest in the subdued but less extreme shades of half-mourning; dove gray, mauve, purple, silver, and white. The styles I chose, since the colors were of necessity quiet, were from the very newest Paris fashion magazines. If I must, perforce, be dressed in mourning, for my hostess's sake (as well as my own), at least it would be an elegant one.

Within a few days of that first shopping excursion, I had written a gentle letter to Alexander McNally explaining my need to get away for a while, promising to write, and putting off the answer that I had promised him until my return at the end of the summer. Perhaps it would have been kinder of me to put an end to his hopes for the future right then and there, but I could no more see the future than he (despite my recent clairvoyance), and it was entirely possible that I might well come back to Dublin in the early autumn ready and resigned to become the wife of Alexander McNally. Who could say?

My wardrobe was assembled and ready to be packed at a moment's notice; a second letter had arrived from Lady Cheng, suggesting that I travel overland by train to Corktown. She had taken accommodations for an overnight stay in Queenstown, the port of Cork, and booked passage for an early sailing on the morning following, all of which would necessitate my leaving Dublin three days hence. There was nothing more to be done but to supervise the packing and to see to the closing of the house.

And so it was that on a glorious April morning I came to stand at the steps of number 70, Merrion Square surrounded by a heap of luggage and hatboxes, awaiting the arrival of the hackney coach that would take me to the Kingsbridge Railway Station. From there, within the hour I would leave for Cork on the first leg of my journey to Moondragon.

The coach came, was packed with my impedimenta, and at last Professor McNally handed me into the carriage, reiterating that he would gladly escort me to the station, but as I had before, I insisted upon leaving alone from the house. The coachman, as if divining my urgent desire to get away without further ado, clicked a signal to his horses, and off I rolled, the heavy weight of those last few months finally uplifted from my shoulders once and for all. I was free! I gave never a backward glance as we pulled out of Merrion Square, for I knew well what lay behind me. The future alone held excitement and promise. My eyes faced squarely forward.

The trip west and south by rail was not long, and I arrived in the town of Cork in the afternoon, pulling into the Glanmire Road Station just in time for me to make the next branch-line train that swung eastward, making a circle around the famous Cove of Cork across a railway bridge and into Queenstown itself, so named for Victoria, who first set foot on Irish soil there in 1849. Needless to say, all good Irishmen still called it Cove.

I had no trouble in finding my way to the Queen's Cove Inn, where Lady Cheng had had accommodations made ready for my overnight stay. Indeed, I was in my rooms but half an hour when a maid came with a message that a gentleman wished to see me in the small parlor below. Having no friends in such a place as Queenstown, and certainly none who knew of my arrival, I had a great curiosity to see who my unexpected visitor might be.

The stranger who waited upon me in the tiny, sparsely furnished visitors' parlor was a ship's captain, by the style of his neat, well-kept seaman's clothing. He was a man of middle height and late middle years, much tanned and weathered by his rough profession, but withal a fit and strong-looking person of hearty and vaguely foreign good looks. I could not readily put my finger on his nationality, but certainly he was not Irish. He was broad-faced and long-headed, with a high brow and a long nose that looked as if it had been broken more than once. His hair, very un-Irish, was straight, fine, and, while graying at the temples, was otherwise a rather light shade of brown.

As I entered the little room, he came forward, smiling broadly, and extended one wide, callused hand in greeting. I extended mine, which he shook firmly but not with the painful grip that I had expected from his hearty manner. He knew how to gear his large grip to the hand of a lady.

"Welcome to the Cove, Miss Fennora. I'm Captain Isaac Vreeland of the ship *Pride o' Bantry*. We'll be sailing for Moondragon with the morning tide."

Now, both by his name and the slight foreign accent that overlaid the Irish lilt that he had acquired with the years, I knew him for the Dutchman that he was. I had seen faces not unlike his in Amsterdam, now that I thought about it.

"Why, how very nice of you to come and greet me this evening, Captain Vreeland, but may I ask how you knew I'd be here?" I was slightly puzzled that I should receive such a visit. After all, the master of a ship must needs be a very busy man, and hardly likely to make social calls upon strange passengers on the eve of a sailing.

The captain's blue eyes twinkled, and he pursed his lips slightly before speaking. "You don't know the Chongs very well, do you?"

"Why, no. I . . ." His answering my question with one of his own rather took me aback, for I had expected—indeed was used to—greater formality than this. He looked at me and spoke to me as if I were a schoolgirl rather than a woman of mature years.

"Well"—he laughed—"it's no wonder then that you ask such a question. When you know them better, you'll find that nothing is left to chance with them—that is, unless they absolutely can't help it. Once, they couldn't help it." Here he laughed again in a different way. "Ah, chance once played them a trick they couldn't help. But that's neither here nor there, and it's still not answering your question.

"Lady Elizabeth sent me to look after you. When you weren't on the last train from Cork, I came here straightaway, knowing that you'd be spending the night here. Neither she nor I would dream of letting a young girl like yourself come to such a rollicking place as the Cove of Cork without a protector nearby to see you stowed safe away for the night."

"Captain Vreeland, it was very kind of you to come. Let me assure you that I am indeed safely 'stowed away' and that I am happy to know that I am so well protected." I made my remarks by way of courtesy, expecting that, his duty done by me, Captain Vreeland would take his leave. Instead, after a brief but awkward silence, he spoke abruptly.

"She wants you to see the coast and to get your first sight of Moondragon from the bay, just as she did over thirty years ago. She fell in love with Bantry Bay, you know . . .

and with Moondragon." This last he added as an after-thought, and with obvious distaste.

"You speak as if you know Lady Elizabeth well." His manner of speaking about her was odd, and made me curious.

"Ach, that I do, young lady. It was I who first sailed her up the bay to Moondragon all those years ago. I had been mate on old Hannibal Cheng's bark *Empress of China*, but he paid me the honor of sending me around to Dublin in his new clipper *Pride o' Bantry* to fetch his son's young bride-to-be and bring her to Moondragon. And so I became a ship's captain, and she became a bride. She was nineteen, and the loveliest thing I'd ever seen."

His face flushed, and the look in his eye told me that she was still the loveliest thing he'd ever seen. He could not help but speak with that blunt honesty that seems to characterize the Dutch race, and so his very tone told me that whatever or whomever else he might love, Lady Elizabeth Cheng held a very special place in his heart.

After a long silence, during which it was obvious that he was reliving a voyage made more than thirty years earlier, the captain came back to himself.

He clapped his hands together abruptly. "Well, there's no sense standing here remembering days long gone by. I've come to ask if you'd care to have dinner on board my ship this evening."

I hesitated, wondering what to answer. He gave me no time, however, to frame a politic reply. "Ach, of course, you have been on trains all day and are tired. How foolish of me not to have realized."

"I am rather exhausted, and since I must rise so early, I had planned a light supper in my room."

"Of course, say no more, my dear. I'll bid you good evening. A carriage will be here at six tomorrow morning to take you to the ship. Pleasant dreams, Miss Fennora."

He shook my hand again, and was gone, leaving me to ponder, as I returned to my rooms, what an odd man he was—a mixture of bluff, manly heartiness, gentlemanly courtesy, and fatherly kindness on the surface, but underneath, romantic, vulnerable, and self-conscious. The very mention of Lady Elizabeth, as he called her, was quite enough to make him blush. It was unusual in my experience to feel so sure of the character of a stranger after so brief a talk, but he was the kind of man who could not help but put all that he was

right out before him. It was simply not in him to dissemble, either consciously or unconsciously. Upon reflection, I found Captain Isaac Vreeland quite remarkable indeed, and certainly very likable. I wondered, perhaps a little maliciously, how much Lady Elizabeth liked him.

Well, perhaps it would not be long before I would know.

The Pride o' Bantry

There's tempest in yon horned moon,
And lightning in yon cloud;
But hark the music, mariners!
The wind is piping loud—
The wind is piping loud, my boys,
The lightning flashes free;
While the hollow oak our palace is,
Our heritage the sea.

—Allan Cunningham

Under the wide blue sky, under her great spread of sunlit canvas, the *Pride o' Bantry* made her way out of Cork harbor, leaving behind the busy, sweeping vista of Queenstown port, dominated by the imposing stone mass of St. Coleman's Cathedral looking down upon the town and harbor from its hilltop perch. Its spire, tall and as yet unfinished, gleamed in the morning light. It was a grand sight to see, so huge that it was already fifteen years in the building and still not completed. As Queenstown and its sights receded, we passed the less pleasing vista of Spike Island with its grim old convict prison, and beyond it, the mainland shore dotted with tiny fishing villages, coves, and beaches. Finally we left Cork harbor behind altogether and sailed out into the Atlantic.

Ever in love with the sea and the gentle pelting of spray in my face, I made my way forward and stood in the starboard bow. Leaning against the railing, I watched the green coast of Ireland pass by. For some time I remained lost in surveying the beautiful and sometimes wild and rocky coastline, dreaming idle daydreams, breathing in the invigorating smell of salt sea air and wishing that there was some way to capture

such moments of heavenly beauty and keep them forever. What a joy it would be to have ever at one's beck and call the means to conjure up a particular moment of one's life—the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes—and by the mere opening, say, of the stopper of a vial, to be able to relive a morning such as this in all its unutterable perfection.

But my sweet reveries were not destined for long to be my own. Captain Vreeland, set free for a time from his immediate duties and undoubtedly taking my solitary figure in the bow for a lonely one, broke in upon my thoughts with a hearty directness and jovial smile. Thus with unwitting cruelty he shattered the fragile web of my thoughts and spoiled some of the very loveliest moments of my recent life.

"It's no trip to be taking alone, is it, young lady? I can see that you're homesick already." As he spoke, he came up beside me and leaned his elbows on the wide railing. I watched him as he stood squinting at the distant coast, his lips drawn back over long, tobacco-stained teeth, his cap pushed back on his broad head, to reveal the line where sun-tanned skin ended and his own pale Nordic complexion began. Clearly he didn't know quite what to say beyond his easy and incorrect assumption of homesickness on my part. He had no way of knowing, of course, that such an emotion had ever been alien to my nature, though evidently common to most of humanity. So, for want of other conversation, I challenged his assumption, without, however, appearing rude, I hoped.

"You know, Captain Vreeland, I don't believe that I have ever been homesick in my life. In fact, have you ever heard of the *Lotophagai*, the lotus-eaters whom *Odysseus* encounters in *Lotus-land* on his return voyage from *Troy*?"

The captain nodded. "Aye, I have that," he acknowledged.

"Well, my father used to say that I was one of the tribe of lotus-eaters. Wherever our travels took us—and I have been to many countries—I have never missed my home (yes, even Ireland, of which the poets always sing), nor ever wanted greatly to go back to it. Perhaps I have never really and truly found a place to think of as home. Perhaps my disposition makes it unnecessary that I have a particular home. Were I born a man, I might well have eschewed a home altogether and have followed the sea, as you have done."

This last remark, while meant primarily to be complimentary to my companion, if not strictly true, certainly was not altogether inconsistent with some of my wilder flights of romantic fancy, either. I soon learned that Captain Vreeland

was not a fanciful man, for he appeared to take my idle remarks quite seriously.

"Would you, now, Miss Fennora?" he asked rhetorically. "Well, if all it takes to be a lotus-eater is forgetfulness of home, you'd do well, I suppose, but in all my years at sea, I've never met a man who wasn't longing for his home once this bow was turned and he knew his homeland lay ahead. Then, too, if my memory serves, Homer said that lotus-eaters were a lazy, luxury-loving lot. No, upon reflection, I think that on both counts no true lotus-eater such as yourself could dare to follow the sea. After all, every ship finally turns toward home, and every seaman does his day's work."

By the mischievous glint in his eye, I knew that I had been incorrect about the captain. He not only had not taken my remarks seriously, but actually he was taking my fragile and rather superficial chatter and turning it against me, fairly teasing me silly with it. He was so merry and good-natured with his teasing humor that I could not even feign a semblance of pique, but rather had to let go altogether of my sometimes rather priggish dignity.

"Enough, enough." I laughed, holding up my hands in a gesture of submission. "I shall take the liberty of paraphrasing the final line of Lord Tennyson's in, appropriately enough, 'Song of the Lotus-Eaters'; 'O rest ye, brother mariner, I will not wander more.' I'll be a land-loving lotus-eater, good captain, I promise, if you will kindly desist from your teasing."

"In short, I should 'rest' like a good 'brother mariner.' That I shall, young lady. I'll rest right here and point out some of the sights along the coast as we pass by."

And so, for most of the morning, when duty did not call him elsewhere, Captain Vreeland showed me the sights to be seen along the southern coast: Kinsale in particular, the beautiful little port at the mouth of the river Bandon, its harbor full of yachts and sailing vessels of all descriptions. Once, in the now fast-waning days of wooden ships, it was a great shipbuilding port, and, as Captain Vreeland told me, had in fact been the birthplace of the very ship upon which I now sailed, as well as that of the long-ago wrecked *Cheng* ship, *Empress of China*.

Just past the headland of Kinsale harbor lay the Old Head of Kinsale, a long rocky finger of land where so many ill-fated ships have been taken by the sea and dashed upon the

treacherous rocks that lie hidden beneath the waves. Such sights as these, of which I had heard or read, but never actually seen, passed by in a gorgeous panorama.

On we sped toward the southwest, the sun rising ever higher on our port stern, but suddenly, as we approached the channel between Clear Island and its sister isle of Sherkin, the sun, which had warmed us the morning long, was all at once obscured. From south and west of us a great black band of clouds approached, bearing wind, rain, and lightning in its wake.

Those sunny morning skies were suddenly gray as steel and slashed by jagged forks of fire. From overhead boomed the deafening, nearly constant rumble of thunder, jangling the nerves with its warlike barrages. Within minutes the decks were awash with the effects of a sudden and violent downpour of chilling rain. The ship rolled in the suddenly turbulent waters; canvas slapped wetly in the wind; and then, as quickly as it began, the storm abated, or rather, passed over our heads, leaving behind wet and dripping decks, which, owing to the immediate reemergence of the hot spring sun, were soon steaming in little columns of rapidly evaporating rainwater.

I was but little disarrayed by the sudden storm, as a consequence of having been escorted aft toward my cabin at its onset by the same young seaman who had accompanied me to the ship from the inn that morning. I had once again confounded my young friend by refusing to go below, and choosing instead to remain in the entrance to the stairway, from which place I could watch the great natural spectacle without becoming too wet. It was a glorious sight, not to be missed by one such as I, and in which I reveled gladly.

But now, with the decks drying visibly, I again took up my vigil in the bow and watched as we passed between the islands of Clear on the port and Sherkin to starboard. North of us, across Roaring Water Bay, which we began to traverse once we emerged from the narrow channel between the islands, I could see the storm running miles wide in a great black, lightning-splintered band that stretched from near the seaward horizon to port all the way to the landward horizon on the starboard.

"It's traveling northwest and will reach Bantry Bay sometime before we do ourselves." Captain Vreeland, who had just come up behind me, voiced an answer to the very question I had upon my mind.

"I think that there is nothing more beautiful than a storm such as that which has just passed—so violent and exciting, but over so soon that it can do no great damage."

"Oh, aye," he replied. "I'm glad you added that last, my dear, for there are storms and storms. Old Hannibal Cheng was lost at sea, you know, back in fifty-one, in the Indian Ocean. Now, there's a place for violent weather. No wee bits of weather like this that's just passed, but great storms that toss ships over and break them apart the way a bit of stone is broken apart under the blow of a sledgehammer. Many's the night I've watched on deck for sudden heavy weather to come up in that ocean. Ach, and many's the time we've lashed the wheel and ourselves, too, to keep the ship steady and ourselves from washing overboard into a heavy sea. Still, it's the life I chose and the life I love."

We stood silent for a while, each wrapped in our own thoughts. Finally it occurred to me to ask more of the long-dead shipowner and sea captain with the unlikely name of Sir Hannibal Cheng.

"Captain, you mentioned earlier the wrecking of the *Empress of China*. Is that the ship that Hannibal Cheng went down with?"

"That she was, miss. Lost in fifty-one, with all hands, including Sir Hannibal Cheng, first Baronet Cheng, who was her captain as well as owner. An odd man he was—imperious, eccentric, tough. Many a man there was who didn't like him—hated him, some did—but I took him as I found him, and I loved him better, respected him more than any man I've ever met. Of course, I had good reason to love him, for he had both saved my life and made my fortune for me. In my book, no finer man has ever lived than old Hannibal Cheng."

Perhaps long, reflective silences are a characteristic of seamen in general; certainly they were a characteristic of Isaac Vreeland in particular. When he did not continue his narrative after some few minutes of silence, I put my hand on his arm and regained his wandering attention. My curiosity demanded to be satisfied.

"Tell me, captain, how came he to save your life?"

He continued to stare off toward the headlands, which we were fast approaching, his keen blue eyes squinting into the distance as if against the glare of the sun, although, in fact,

his brow was well shaded by the brim of his cap. He nodded toward the cliffs ahead.

"The first is Brow Head. Then we round Mizan Head and pass Three Castle Head, cross the mouth of Dunmanus Bay, and turn north into Bantry Bay itself."

"So indeed we do," I replied. "I noted our route on the chart, which I studied before leaving on this voyage." My tone was not very warm, since it rather annoyed me that he chose not to answer my innocent question. It put me in the untenable position of appearing to pry into his affairs. "I did not mean to pry, captain. If you do not wish to tell me the circumstances of your life being saved, I certainly respect your wishes." I suppose I could not help sounding piqued, since I had only asked to hear of his adventures after he himself had brought the subject up, and, moreover, in an endeavor to keep abreast of the many awkward lapses in our conversation, lapses perhaps not unnatural in view of the fact that we had been acquainted a bare eighteen hours, but nevertheless uncomfortable and compounded by the captain's own native taciturnity.

Brought back to attention by the admitted snippiness of my remarks, Captain Vreeland protested, "Pray don't misunderstand my silence, Miss Fennora. I shall be only too happy to relate the tale, for it is really quite interesting, but it is a long story and not to be told in a minute." He smiled warmly at me, exhibiting a winning charm that made me wonder once more what Lady Elizabeth Cheng thought of her hardy Dutch sea captain. By his look I thought him about to begin the telling of his tale, but all at once, he saw something over my shoulder that evidently disturbed him, and his expression changed abruptly.

I turned hastily and followed his scowling gaze. What I saw was an odd sight indeed. Squatting on the deck in the farthest forward point of the bow, deep in the shadow created by the coming together of the port and starboard railings at the bowsprit, was a strange-looking youth, small and fair of skin like a white man but with long narrow black oriental eyes and dark auburn hair worn in the long pigtail of a Chinese. He wore a long, elaborately embroidered coat of sulfur-yellow silk, blue trousers, and black slippers on his small feet. The outfit would have been attractive in its way, had it not been filthy and stained down its front with long dribbles that indicated a dreadful lack of coordination and the inability to ingest food with any degree of accuracy. This

may sound a pompous and uncharitable description, but the long, moist stains were evocative to a great degree and struck me at the time in just that manner. His unkempt appearance did not stop my heart from going out to him, however, for I could see readily that the poor boy was a half-wit and unable to care for his own person properly.

Captain Vreeland excused himself from my company, crossed the ship to the boy in the bow with a long, determined stride, and yanking him up bodily from the deck, hurled him down against the forward hatch with great force. I had expected the poor soul to go scurrying back toward the stern, away from the barrage of what I took to be rather vile epithets in an odd singsong language, which, under the circumstances and judging by the looks of the youth to whom they were addressed, must be Chinese. The boy, however, rather than beating a hasty and prudent retreat, took his time in leaving. He passed by, giving, as he did so, an unnervingly sly and overly familiar glance in my direction.

His maimed intellect, as I saw upon closer scrutiny, distorted his features sadly, but I could see at once that he appeared to be a half-caste. Unfortunately, neither the soft, exotic beauty of the Oriental races nor the angular strength of the Western could be said to have dominated. Rather, the beauties of both people were sadly lost, his resultant ugliness caused by the fact that he was a simpleton: slack of jaw, lolling of tongue, and grotesque of movement. He went aft as slowly as possible, obviously in a deliberate attempt to further annoy the captain, but finally he disappeared below decks, as he had evidently been ordered to do. I could not, in truth, say that I was unhappy to see him go, for it was no pleasant thing to look upon him. However, his treatment at the hands of my companion seemed unnecessarily harsh, though it was hardly my place to remonstrate with the captain in such a matter, and so I kept silent. By the indifferent glances of the few crewmen who hovered nearby, I took this to be no uncommon occurrence about the *Pride o' Bantry*.

As the boy finally went below, Captain Vreeland returned to my side, the scowl of anger still upon his face. "I hate that foul creature! I'd like nothing better than to feed his ugly hide to the sharks. He has no business on this ship. He must have stowed away three days ago when I sailed from Bantry, and he's been skulking around behind my back ever since, I'll wager—all the way to the Cove and back. He's only dared to come out and show himself now because he knows I won't

bother to throw him in the brig for what little is left of the voyage.

"He's the devil's own spawn, that one. He appears harmless enough, but he has a streak of cruelty in him toward animals that makes my blood boil. Don't you ever trust him or let him near you for a second, Miss Fennora. Not for a second, not ever!"

"Shall I ever have occasion to, captain? Surely he's not from Moondragon?" I asked, taken aback by the very thought of ever having to see the boy again.

"Oh, isn't he, isn't he?" The captain was still incensed by the intrusion. His sudden seething anger quite surprised me, since he had, up until this point, seemed so humorous, charming, and, despite his moodiness, altogether even-tempered. "That . . . that thing," he went on, sputtering with rage, his face red, his slight Dutch accent becoming more apparent as his temper flared, "that thing is the bastard son of the housekeeper at Moondragon, Mrs. Ling. She's called 'Mrs.' as a courtesy, of course. That half-witted son of hers has the run of the place. There's never any telling where that ugly, drooling face of his will turn up or what mischief he is liable to perpetrate against some unprotected animal he happens to come across."

I was considerably shaken by this unwelcome revelation. "Captain Vreeland," I protested, "surely Lady Elizabeth does not allow morally unfit persons to work for her? Neither the boy should be welcome, nor his mother. And to consider such a woman fit to head her domestic staff—it is unthinkable! In fact, not only unthinkable for Lady Elizabeth herself, but how on earth does she keep a proper staff under such a housekeeper? Most servants are dreadfully uppish about matters of impropriety."

"Indeed they are in most houses, Miss Fennora, but there is no trouble over her at Moondragon, for she keeps to herself and manages the place admirably. Then, too, Lady Elizabeth herself is such a saint that few would not put up with the one for the sake of the other.

"Mrs. Ling has run Moondragon for many years—long before Lady Elizabeth came to the bay, long before she had this bastard son of hers—and she's very efficient, too, I grudgingly admit, but I swear she's a devil, and I for one will never trust her."

"What is she like?" I asked. "What indeed can she be like,

to have given birth to such a . . . " I trailed off, groping for a word that was both appropriate and charitable.

" . . . a thing as that?" the captain put in with characteristic if unimaginative directness.

" Such a poor soul as the boy is," I said pointedly, feeling reluctant to condone such a harsh label as the captain suggested.

" Well, first of all, she's every bit as fine a woman to look at as her son is ugly, for all her having only one good eye. Then, too, as dull-witted as he is, she's as smart as ever a woman was—calculating, too. She's in her late fifties, older than Lady Elizabeth by about five or six years. The story is that she was born in China, her parents a pair of heathens who were going to kill her because she had been born with a blind eye—as evil an eye as you've ever seen—that, and the fact that she was a girl child to begin with. They're like that out there, you know. Human life hasn't the value in the East that it has here."

" Do please go on," I urged, rather impatiently, I am afraid to say. " This is a fascinating story."

" Aye, I found it so myself when first I heard it. In fact, Mrs. Ling and I have something in common." He reflected on this remark for a moment. " Yes, it's odd that I never thought of it in just that way before, but it's quite true. You see, Sir Hannibal Cheng saved her life, too. Aye, and made her fortune, just as he did mine."

" How very odd," I murmured, caught up in the same reflective mood that had the captain in its thrall.

" Indeed! I can understand him saving my life. After all, I was an able-bodied young seaman in sore need of being fished out of the China Sea! But why that old curmudgeon would bother to save the life of a scrawny, one-eyed, heathen girl baby has always puzzled me, but he did. He bought her for gold, in fact, and brought her around the world to Moondragon, feeding her himself on goat's milk through the fingers of a leather glove. When he finally got back to Ireland, they say he had to pay a fortune for an English wet nurse to care for the babe. His Chinese servants thought that they were too good for such a task, and the Irish locals were too superstitious to want to care for such a creature—not only a China baby but one with an 'evil eye,' to boot. Anyway, she grew up at Moondragon, was educated by tutors, and occasionally even by old Hannibal Cheng himself. She ran the house for him as he grew older. When Lady Elizabeth married his son,

William, she was kept on there as housekeeper, despite the fact that after her marriage Lady Elizabeth would have been within her rights to select one of her own choosing."

"Surely she should have dismissed her after this illegitimate child came along?"

"No, she did not, which under the circumstances speaks well for Lady Elizabeth's generous heart." Captain Vreeland then went on, regardless of the fact that the details were hardly fit for the ears of a lady, to tell the story of how Mrs. Ling came to bear such a son. I could not blame him for being so frank with me, for I had asked to hear the story, and he, being a seafaring man and used to the rougher ways of the world, had no thought that he might be offending my sensibilities by the relating of such a tale with all its implications of gross sexuality and violent lust.

"You see, Miss Fennora, the whole ugly episode began one spring evening about twenty years ago. Mrs. Ling had been sent out on an errand by Lady Elizabeth that took her into Glencannis rather later than was usual for her to be abroad alone. The errand consumed quite a bit of time, it seems, and she was overtaken by darkness on her return to the gates of Moondragon.

"As she came back in her small pony trap, a group of young men—drunken brawlers from over Adrigole way—stepped out into the road and stopped the carriage. They were louts, of course, the kind of scum that every village in Ireland used to have to put up with. Fortunately, most of that sort have either killed each other off or have gone over the water to London or America, where they can raise hell in proper style.

"Well, I'll be brief. They waylaid the woman, and each of them had his way with her, leaving her for dead by the side of the road. But she wasn't dead. No, not by a long chalk. She managed to reach the trap, where the pony had dragged it to some grass by the side of the road, and she made her way back to Moondragon in it. That mixed-breed half-wit that you've seen is the result.

"Lady Elizabeth, of course, felt terrible about the incident, felt guilty, in fact, for having sent her out so late, and could not—would not—think of turning her out, despite a great deal of advice to the contrary."

"No, surely not. I can certainly see that she could not very well blame the woman or turn her out, but surely she could

have given her money and sent her away—sent her back to China, perhaps."

"You might do that. I might do it, and a thousand other sensible persons might, Miss Fennora, but not Lady Elizabeth. She regards Mrs. Ling as a part of Moondragon, and as long as she lives, that woman will always have a place there, and that son of hers will continue, as a result, to be the very bane of my existence."

"Tell me, captain. Did they ever find the men who brutalized her so? Were they ever punished?"

The captain frowned thoughtfully. "It's funny you should ask that question. Every man on the estate, regardless of his feelings for Mrs. Ling herself, was willing to take arms against the type of scum who'd so misuse a woman, whosoever she be, but Mrs. Ling claimed that it was dark and that she had never been able to see their faces, nor even to tell just how many there actually were. In the next few months, however, after that baby was born, seven men from the villages of Adrigole and Glencannis—good friends and drinking companions all—died violent deaths, very ugly deaths, in fact. No one ever hanged for those deaths, but there are those about who think it's a *woman* should have swung for them. I think so too, and I'll wager it's a heathen Chinese woman at that."

"You're saying that Mrs. Ling is a murderer, then?" I asked, surprised that I was able to keep my voice so level after such a statement.

"I'm not saying anything, Miss Fennora, for there's nothing to say. No clue was ever found. No name was ever named. But my final advice to you is to have as little as possible to do with Mrs. Ling, and nothing whatever to do with young Master Hannibal Ling."

I must have looked startled at that remark.

"Aye, Miss Fennora, and it turns my stomach to even think of it. That bi—pardon, miss—that woman had the temerity to call that devil's spawn after such a man as he was. I repeat, have nothing to do with him, and as little to do with her—with Mrs. Ling—as you can possibly help. And now, forgive me, miss. I'll have to attend to the ship. That's Sheep's Head to port, which means that we'll soon be entering Bantry Bay."

He walked off, barking orders to the men in the rigging, but turned back in my direction and called, "I'll be back when I can get away to point out your first sight of Moondragon to

you." With that Captain Vreeland tipped his cap to me and moved off along the deck, once more shouting orders to the crew, nearly all of whom now scurried about the decks and through the rigging in preparation for the last little bit of our journey.

Slowly we swung around, changing course, so that now we sailed toward the northeast into the wide mouth of Bantry Bay. I crossed expectantly to the port bow, knowing that somewhere on the meadow-topped and undulating rocky cliffs of the Beara peninsula stood the great house that was my destination. For the first time since receiving the invitation from Lady Elizabeth Cheng, I felt some grave misgivings about my decision to come here. The sight of that poor simpleton on the deck, together with the implication that his mother was a murderer, as well as Captain Vreeland's stern and repeated warnings, had unsettled me to no small degree. I felt far less certain now of what lay before me, especially since I had been warned so urgently by a man I took to be, if a roughish diamond, at least a reliable one.

It was doubly unsettling that the woman against whom I was warned was, like the lady of my visions, an Oriental.

The storm that had passed over us that morning and which had remained more or less in sight all during the latter part of our voyage had passed across Bantry Bay but a little time before we began our sail into those waters.

As I watched the swiftly passing coastline, I put the unpleasantness of my conversation with the captain out of my mind entirely and was happily anxious for my first sight of Moondragon. Beyond the long, high cliffs of the Beara I could see the telltale black band of storm clouds and lightning passing across the Caha Mountains, which run down the spine of the broad green peninsula. The storm hovered on the skyline, creating the odd but pleasant effect of sunny daylight along the coast, and as if a line had been drawn to divide them, darkest night over the farther landscape. It was a beautiful and effective scene, the worthy subject for the brush of a great painter.

Just as the ship approached the easternmost tip of Bere Island in the bay, Captain Vreeland rejoined me, carrying with him his own large brass telescope, glowing with a satiny polish that betokened long years of constant use, and a smaller one, brass also, but with a scuffed leather casing encircling its lower section.

"I thought you'd get a better sight of her with this." He handed me the graceful, delicate little spyglass. "Moondragon's a fine place from any angle, but she's best seen from the water. They built her that way, of course, so that her master would always have a fine first sighting of her after a long journey. No lotus-eaters they, the men who built Moondragon." Here he gave me a mischievous wink that made me blush to think of my idle remarks of the morning.

"Way back then, in the 1690's, a sea voyage was a long, dangerous affair. A man wanted a sight of his home as soon as he could, so the Chongs, being like other men in that at least, built theirs right on the edge of the highest cliff they could find. As you'll soon see, it's a fine sight, placed as it is right on the brow of the cliff. There's a deep, wide valley that falls away behind it and then sweeps up to Hungry Hill, which rises beyond Moondragon like a great green curtain. Yes, she's a fine sight, is Moondragon, and though it's not mine to come home to, the first glimpse of those white walls and that red roof will have the power to stir my soul till the day I die. Aye, that it will."

Captain Vreeland spoke those rather emotional words aloud, but hardly for my benefit. He was lost in a daydream, though less a daydream of Moondragon than of the lady who lived there. It was Elizabeth Cheng who stirred the soul of Isaac Vreeland.

The last tip of Bere Island slipped past us. "She'll soon be coming into view. Sight her first with your naked eye, but then you'll want a better view," he explained, indicating with a little nod the little leatherbound telescope I held. With his own large one he pointed at a wide, rather strange building that perched on the highest cliff along that portion of the rocky coast. Until virtually that very moment it had been obscured by the island, but now we had a fine—in fact, perfect—head-on view of one of the oddest and grandest houses I had ever seen.

Against the rain-drenched forest-green backdrop of Hungry Hill, the long, high house glowed with almost unnatural whiteness in the sunlight. Its main roof was a broad, oddly high slash of brick-red tile. No chimneys appeared to mar the graceful sweep of that impressive roof that looked like no other I had ever seen.

"Why, it's huge," I exclaimed when the captain finally interrupted my survey to ask my impression of my destination. "And beautiful, too," I added less surely, knowing it was ex-

pected that I should think so. "You are quite right about the setting. It could hardly be lovelier." I still had not yet made up my mind about the house. Its proportions struck me as being distinctly unfamiliar; not altogether what I had expected.

"Spy it through the glass before we have passed it," he urged.

"Aye, aye, Captain Vreeland," I laughingly answered as I flicked back the little lens covers and put the telescope to my eye in something of a parody of what I took to be nautical style. It took me a moment to adjust the sight, and I let out a cry of surprise as the great house finally came into focus.

"It's a Chinese house! No wonder the roofs look so very odd to me. I can see them now quite well. They are all ripply little tiles, and they curve up at the corners like the roof of a pagoda." And indeed I was right, for at each corner of the upper and lower roof, the joinings swept down to the eaves and turned back up again in the manner of an oriental temple or palace. A stranger sight than this I could not have imagined; a mansion in the style of an oriental palace overlooking Bantry Bay in County Cork, as Irish a county as Ireland could boast. As Alice would say, "curiouser and curioser."

"And are you really so surprised that it should be so? Did you not know, Miss Fennora, that the first Chengs to come to Bantry Bay were exiled Chinese nobility, pirates and soldiers of fortune? Did you not know that they settled here, built Moondragon, and that even now, after all these generations, they're still nearly half-Chinese by blood? Sometimes, I swear, nearly all-Chinese by nature!"

"No, Captain Vreeland," I replied rather weakly, suddenly feeling very foolish. "I knew none of this, although I suppose I should have done. Surely my parents must have mentioned their origins many years ago, but I was a child then. I never remembered. I guess, actually, that that must be the odd thing which I couldn't remember about Lady Elizabeth's late husband, Sir William Cheng. I knew that there was something unusual about him, but I could not for the life of me remember just what it was."

"Oh, he was unusual, all right. He was Hannibal Cheng's only son, and he was half-Chinese. Lady Elizabeth chose to marry him. She loved him." The tone of his voice was bitter, and I saw now why so many of the captain's remarks about

the Cheng family had had such an edge to them. It rather galled his simple soul that the lady of his dreams should have preferred a man of mixed blood to one of his own pure strain. In a way, I could not blame him. I could not, for instance, imagine myself in the place of the former Elizabeth Sarsfield-Jones, choosing of my own volition to marry a man whose blood was not of the same purity as my own.

"Did it never occur to you that the very name of Cheng is Chinese? Really, Miss Fennora, you surprise me!" The captain was quite right, of course, and his question only made me feel more foolish than ever.

"No, no, it never did occur to me. I never thought of it at all. I suppose this sounds very silly to you, captain, but after all, your life has evidently been spent in the China Seas, whereas mine has been spent in Dublin and in the university towns of Europe. The farthest east I have ever been is Egypt, and though I've seen Arabs and Lascars and Turks and Greeks, the only Orientals I have ever seen have been in traveling shows or picture books.

"I realized Cheng was an unusual name, of course. I'd never heard it before, but since I know hardly a word of Gaelic, it didn't surprise me in the least that I should come across an unfamiliar name in a part of Ireland that's strange to me to begin with. For all I knew, it was an old regional name in the old tongue. I suppose that you think I'm awfully ignorant"—I pouted rather defensively—"but I do speak German, French, and Italian fluently, and I am proficient in Latin and in both ancient and modern Greek. It never occurred to me that I had to know Chinese too!"

With somewhat uncharacteristic forbearance, the captain made no reply to my feeble protestations.

Once more I held the glass to my eye for a last look at the house on the cliff. At the acute angle from which I now viewed it, the stormy black sky in the far distance formed its only backdrop. Suddenly, as I watched through the glass, a jagged flash of lightning tore across the heavens behind the house, silhouetting it for a brief few seconds against the day-light-white glare and revealing the tiny, motionless figure of a heavily robed woman who appeared to be standing on the highest point of that distinctive and peculiar red tile roof.

In an instant the sky behind Moondragon was black again, the roof undefined against it, the house growing smaller and less distinct by the second as our ship sailed on up the bay.

An involuntary chill went down my spine, and suddenly I

was covered with perspiration. In a voice unsteady with the effort of keeping my nerves in check, I asked one last question of Captain Vreeland. "Tell me, is there a promenade or widow's walk across the topmost roof of Moondragon?" I did not look at his face, perhaps dreading to read the answer in his puzzled eyes before I heard it from his lips. I held my breath for his answer.

"Why, no, Miss Fennora. There's no way at all to get up on that roof, save by ladder. Why do you ask?"

I made no reply, but that dear little leatherbound spyglass, as if speaking for me, fell from my trembling fingers, struck the ship's rail, and tumbled eloquently into the dark waters of Bantry Bay.

The lady of my visions had not been left behind, like a bad dream in the night, at the house in Merrion Square. Even now she awaited me within the lofty walls of the house called Moondragon, and I had no choice now but to heed her call and come.

Moondragon

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The last miles from Bantry town, on roads that wound now along the high cliffs bordering the bay, now through the long, wide valleys behind, were accomplished at a great clip and in fine style by the high-spirited chestnut geldings and elegant, graceful maroon-and-yellow carriage that had been sent to fetch me from on board the *Pride o' Bantry*.

Now I had only to sit back and enjoy the great vistas of bay and meadow and mountain to either side of me, at once relaxed by the beauty and solemnity of this ancient land and stimulated by anticipation of my imminent arrival at Moon-dragon itself.

Occasionally we would pass through a tiny village; indeed, most were hardly worthy of that name, being for the most part merely a cluster of small granite cottages, thatched and spare, with small kitchen gardens, a sheep or goat, and a few scrawny chickens. As we passed through, men would gaze from the doorways of inns, women turn from their chores, children from their play, to see the fine lady (as they might suppose) who rode by them in such luxury. I, in my turn, stared straight ahead at such moments with a dignity befitting the honor of my hostess and the elegance of her equipage. Little suspected those curious folk that I in my dignity was just as curious about them and longed to turn my head and watch them as I passed, even as they did me.

But it was an idle desire, and not to be compared with the luxury of a ride in such a carriage and attended by a dashing

driver and footmen accoutred in finely tailored livery of blue accented with sulfur yellow, old-fashioned kid breeches, and high black boots. Caught up as I was by the enchantment of it all, I scarcely remembered the qualms I had had after my unsettling conversation with Captain Vreeland. Things had gone so well upon my leaving the ship that I had not even had to bear with the further sight of the poor half-wit, Hannibal Ling.

Lady Elizabeth had dispatched not only the light open carriage in which I now rode, but also a heavier, closed coach in which to convey my luggage and the sundry items shipped from Cork for the use of her household. It was in that slower vehicle somewhere behind us on the road that the unfortunate boy now rode.

We had passed through Adrigole town and swept into and almost immediately out of the pretty, rather prosperous village of Glencannis. Ahead on the right loomed the imposing heights of Hungry Hill. Somewhere on the left, perhaps behind the high stone wall that had paralleled the road for some time now, lay my destination.

At just that moment the carriage made a sudden swerve to the left, taking a narrow side road that went directly toward those very walls. We rolled through a small coppice, slowing rather abruptly, and finally stopped before the grandest gateway I had ever seen, and as I thought then in my naiveté, the very strangest. I little knew then the wonders awaiting me on that fateful afternoon, my first within the exotic walls of Moondragon.

That gateway that so intriguingly broke the monotony of the high gray walls of the park was made up of three parts and looked rather like a pavilion in form. The center section, very wide and perhaps twenty feet high, was surmounted by a hip roof of red tiles curving up at the corner ribs to form projecting eaves of the same style as that of the great house I had seen from the bay. Queer little copper figures of fantastic beasts crouched on each of these corner ridges of the little roof. Exotic fishtailed birds perched at either end of the topmost ridge, adding an almost whimsical note to the otherwise stolidly dignified gateway.

There were correspondingly smaller but otherwise identical roofs upon the two narrow gateways that flanked the wider one. They, too, had their complement of grotesque copper animals, their strange green forms contrasting vividly, even

pleasantly with the brick-red tiles of the roofs and the dark gray native granite of the side posts and wall.

These smaller, side gateways were perhaps fifteen feet in height, and each held a single narrow but massively built mahogany gate. These gates reached to the height of ten feet, just the level of the park wall. The double gates of the central section, also of mahogany, were at least twelve to fourteen feet high, and very nearly as wide as they were high.

Never had I seen or heard of such a spectacular entrance to an estate in my life, but marvel as I did over it, in the next moment my wondering eyes beheld a sight one imagines to occur only in oriental fairy tales or at the court of the emperors of China. Those immense mahogany gates swung back ponderously at the hands of two tall, slender Chinese, their livery of the selfsame winter blue and sulfur yellow as that of the Irish driver and footmen who escorted my carriage. There, however, ended the similarity, for the dress of the gatekeepers was in the Chinese manner: long yellow silk robes, heavily embroidered with strange creatures and exotic birds and flowers, blue silk trousers, and black satin slippers. Their long, thick jet-black hair hung behind in the pigtail that every Chinese seems to wear. Their heads were covered by small black satin skullcaps. It took my mightiest effort not to gape, as would any typical Irish country lass, at such a sight.

The horses started up again. We lumbered slowly through the massive granite gateway, while on either side, the two Chinese keepers, each with one hand on his gate, the other laid upon his heart, bowed low to the passing carriage. "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan . . ."

A few feet beyond the gate, in a grove of ancient willows, was a tiny gatekeeper's cottage of granite, with the same style of roof as that of the gate, also surmounted by a myriad of copper grotesques.

Ahead and to either side lay rolling green meadows dotted with scattered flocks of sheep and goats. Off in distant paddocks, horses gamboled with their frisky yearlings. Along the side of the road, a fluffy pure white cat lay sunning herself as her six white kittens tumbled and played in the grass. Within the gray-bound precincts of the park, all was green and fresh and growing as far as the eye could see. "So twice five miles of fertile ground with walls and towers were girdled round."

We rode for some time on a smooth, winding course that gradually took us out of the long valley that Captain Vreeland had mentioned and up toward the high cliffs of

Bantry Bay. At one point we crossed a small wooden bridge of oriental design, passing over a bamboo-bordered brook along the banks of which iris and lilies and untold numbers of exotic spring flowers of all colors bloomed in riotous profusion. Each meadow and field was bordered with great willows, or, marvelous to tell, tall, swaying palms. As we drove out of the valley, I could see long rows of unfamiliar flowering trees planted in the lee of the rising ground; trees which in their season would bear strange fruits more suited to tropic lands. "And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree."

Despite the manifold distractions, I had managed to keep my bearings quite well. We had been heading, regardless of our many twists and turnings, in a generally southerly direction since entering the high gates of Moondragon park, but suddenly, after making a wide arc directly to the east, the roadway curved due west toward the rapidly setting sun and ran right along the very edge of Bantry Bay.

The water, to my left, was as smooth as glass, almost purple in the fast-fading light. Away to my right, I could look down on the soft green meadows of the valley through which we had just ridden. Far in the distance, just where the valley floor began to rise again, ran the high granite walls of the estate, beyond it the public road and the sweeping heights of Hungry Hill. As far as one could see, there was only beauty to behold.

Our path curved through a thick coppice of old, old trees, one of many such little woods that had evidently been planted generations ago by the hand of man in order to break the grim monotony of the barren, bleak cliffs. Once more was there brought to my mind a scrap of that strangely beautiful, oddly dreamlike poem of Coleridge's: "And here were forests ancient as the hills/ Enfolding sunny spots of greenery."

As suddenly as we had entered the cover of those ancient trees, we were out again, and I saw that a hundred yards ahead, facing squarely south across the bay, was the great house itself—Moondragon—and what a "stately pleasure-dome" it was!

We all of us, perhaps, have marveled over travelers' tales of the mysterious Forbidden City in Peking, serenely hidden for centuries from prying occidental eyes by its mighty fortress walls. Even so, I had come through mighty walls, through fortress gates to the very brink of great, high ancient

cliffs, to gaze in awe at the vast building that now loomed before me. Even such as this, I thought, must be the fabled temples and palaces of old Peking. In buildings such as these must live the highborn men of China. Moondragon was no mere baronets' stately home, nor some ducal noble pile, but a palace rather, and fit to shelter the princess born of imperial majesty.

Immense it was, a long high house of brilliant white limestone set upon a story-tall foundation of finely dressed granite, wide at the base but narrowing in a graceful curve to a terrace or roofed portico on the second-story level. This portico went around the entire floor, its red tile lean-to roof at once shading the rooms within and providing the eye with a fluid line up to the third story, the white walls of which were broken by rows of small wooden-shuttered windows that peeped out of deep shadows formed by the broad eaves of the truly spectacular pagoda roof above.

These eaves, deeper than any I had ever seen on a Western house, curved at the corner ribs like the upturned talons of some fantastic beast. Each corner rib of each section of roof, whether of the lean-to style over the portico or of the hip style of the main roof, bore its full complement of verdigris Chinese beasts, just as the topmost rib of that broad, high roof was graced by the same pair of fishtailed owls that leered from the roofs of the gates and the keeper's cottage.

The horses trotted up a curving carriage drive bordered by a low stone wall, and slowed instinctively, as if to enable me to view the monstrous palace at my leisure. We approached the front doors head-on, passing through an open wooden gate of similar design to the impressive main gates, but of much smaller and more delicate proportions. In fact, it formed a perfect complement, by that very delicacy, to the massive structure behind it. This little gate gave entrance to a large cobbled courtyard enclosed by the ever-present low gray walls. A few yards beyond the gates lay the main entrance to Moondragon.

Flanking this entrance, which was deeply recessed in the thick walls of the ground floor, were two gigantic bronze figures, each fully eight feet in height, of the mythical Chinese lion. They sat upon their haunches, each with one paw raised, the other resting upon an orb of rock-crystal, their great blind eyes staring out of broad, doglike heads at the glorious panorama of Bantry Bay, its farther shore bathed in evening mists that they would never see.

Between the huge guardian lions, deep in the recessed doorway of the hall, I caught my first glimpse of the double doors themselves. They were each ten feet high by four feet wide, of rich, dark mahogany, and carved over every inch in the most marvelous manner. The central motif of each door was a monstrous dragon, its scales and claws and teeth picked out in gold; its body a twisting mass of coils. Each was locked in mortal combat, the one with a giant phoenix bird, the other with just such a dragon as itself. Where one might expect a knob or ring or ordinary doors, there were, instead, two great gilt-bronze claws, the talons of which gripped rock-crystal balls the size of grapefruit.

I had, of course, but little time to grasp some impression of all these unimagined marvels, as, with the aid of a footman, I alighted and set foot for the first time on the ground before Moondragon. Scarcely, in fact, had I beheld the gilded dragons that scowled from the carved doors of the hall before these doors fairly flew open at the hands of two Chinese manservants dressed in the manner of the gatekeepers, and Lady Elizabeth Chêng herself came forward to greet me.

She approached, not with the stately dignity that one might expect of a woman who has lived for thirty-odd years in such palatial surroundings as these, but rather with all the warmth and enthusiasm of the young, impulsive girl she must once have been. She did not wait to reach me before speaking, but called out her greetings to me even as she came down the marble steps and passed between the bronze lions. Hers was a mellifluous Irish voice that could not help but give me a wistful pang, for she sounded much as I remembered my mother sounding long ago in my lost girlhood.

For an instant a wave of bitter sorrow and self-pity threatened to overwhelm me that it was not my own loving mother who came toward me with such affectionate greetings, welcoming me with open arms, enfolding with a mother's caress. I steeled myself against the much-desired but futile longing and swallowed the lump that had come to my throat, and erasing that momentary sorrow from my heart and mind by main force, stepped forward to greet with like warmth my charming hostess.

She caught me impulsively in her embrace, kissed me lightly on both cheeks, hugged me, and then stepped back to the length of her arms in order to survey my face. I could tell that she sought to find by my features some reminder of my mother, and happily she did, for we were very alike, and it

always pleased me when others saw, over the long bridge of years, the resemblance between us.

"Yes, my dear, you are like, very like her as she was when we were girls together. My dear child, how good it is to have you here." Once more she hugged me to her heart; then, turning, ordered a Chinese servant who hovered in the doorway to take up the small handbag that I had carried with me from the ship and which still rested on the floor of the carriage. As he moved to collect the little case, Lady Elizabeth led me up the steps between those immense lions, through the massive carved doors, and past a battery of silent but curious servants, both Chinese and Irish, and into the huge, dimly lit main hall of Moondragon. We entered with as little ceremony as if we were in the meanest fishmonger's hovel in Dublin, and with as much speed as one might wish to leave such an establishment.

Though Lady Elizabeth had locked my arm with affectionate possessiveness in hers, I could scarce keep up with her pace as she hurried me through the hall. After all, she had seen these splendors before, perhaps hardly noticed them anymore. I, on the other hand, could barely credit my eyes that such exotic treasures as these I saw all about me really lay in a house on the cliffs of Bantry Bay. Surely I had been transported to some mystic Eastern palace where incense burners were as tall as trees and furniture grew wings and claws and eyes like the strange, horned creatures of mythology.

With not the slightest pause she led me past marvels I longed to linger over, and nearly pulled me toward a flight of broad stairs with intricate carved banisters. She chatted all the while with the ingenuous eagerness of a girl, questioning me minutely about my trip, but giving me no time to answer.

Halfway up those majestic stairs, we made a right-angle turn and began to climb toward a wide upper hallway. There, at the head of the flight of steps, shadowy in the darkened hall ahead, stood a figure robed in heavy silk brocade, embroidered in threads of silver and gold. She was young and very beautiful, with a face like the moon and eyes like polished onyx. Around her ivory throat, glinting warmly in the opened neck of her robe, was the Dragon of the Moon.

She stood there unmoving, silent, and smiling, undisturbed by the amiable chatter of Lady Elizabeth or by the clumsy maneuverings of the servants who followed us up the stairs with my newly arrived luggage; undisturbed, too, by the look

of horror that must have been in my eyes at her unexpected appearance in the midst of such bustle. I gazed up the stairs at her and realized—most terrible realization of all—that she was unseen by every soul save me.

Lady Elizabeth was lonely, if not for company—there was plenty of that at Moondragon, as I soon discovered—then certainly for companionship. It was this hunger for a close companion that helped me so well to recover my shaken composure after sighting “my Lady of the Dragon,” for despite the fact that I had gone white to the lips and nearly fainted at the sight of that serene figure, impassive amidst the chatter and jumble around her, Lady Elizabeth had remained happily oblivious of my plight. Still chirping brightly, she had pulled me along the cool, dark corridor and ensconced me in an elegant, restful bed-sitting suite with doors that opened out onto the wide portico and a gorgeous view of the misty, benighted bay.

By the time I had flopped, somewhat ungracefully I fear, into a big, comfortable, silk-upholstered easy chair, I had regained most of my composure and could begin to converse sensibly with my eager and amiable hostess.

I do not mean, by the foregoing, to imply that Lady Elizabeth was at all a callous, unconcerned, or self-centered person. Quite the contrary, she was the soul of goodhearted generosity, but her native girlishness, together with the fact that she had had no daughters, sisters, or other female companions, aside from the dour and socially unacceptable Mrs. Ling, had made her exceedingly eager for my visit. It was her momentary excitement at my arrival that had caused her to overlook—fortunately, for my sake—my near-faint upon the stairs.

Now, forcing the incident from my mind, I answered all my hostess's questions concerning my trip, noting, as I did, that any mention of Captain Vreeland brought a certain warmth to her eyes, and a smile, while to actually praise him was to give her what I am sure she thought was secret joy. It only confirmed what I had thought likely, for the captain's rough charm and strength would engage any woman. Lady Elizabeth's ingenuous girlishness and warm heart would be well suited to attracting and being attracted by such a man. What a pity it seemed to me that their stations in life were so very far apart, for while he'd have made no master of such

an elegant and strange place as Moondragon, she, I could tell, would make a bustling and delightful captain's lady.

With great efficiency, her servants began to unpack my cases and trunks, and so I took the opportunity of showing her some of the modish dresses that I had brought with me from Dublin. As she exclaimed over my wardrobe, I had the leisure to regard Lady Elizabeth herself more fully.

She was a small, slender woman whose hair, still more black than gray, was parted in the middle and worn in the flat, over-the-ear style of the 1840's and 1850's. It was a terribly old-fashioned coif, though it became her well enough, and, in fact, heightened a certain superficial resemblance that I had marked earlier. In her youth she had no doubt been told of her resemblance to the then young Queen Victoria. This would have been no compliment, to my mind, for surely Lady Elizabeth must have been far prettier than Victoria ever was. Certainly, despite the lack of color in her complexion, she was still a pretty woman, even in her fifties. Her eyes were her best feature, being huge, dark brown, and liquid, with an intensity of fire in them that betrayed her Welsh blood. While her teeth were intact and rather good for someone of her years, nevertheless they marred what was otherwise a warm and wholly unaffected smile.

It delighted me that she enjoyed going through my dresses and bonnets as they were taken from their boxes by a trio of maids. Not only did it assure me that I had brought along suitable attire to please her as my hostess, but it also meant that my gifts to her would be appreciated and enjoyed.

"Lady Elizabeth," I cried, caught up by her infectious vivacity, "I have brought you a present." Turning to a pert Irish maid who was obviously enjoying the excitement of a female visitor almost as much as her mistress, I described the box I sought.

"Why, here it is this very minute, miss," she exclaimed, snatching from the hands of a Chinese manservant who was just entering the room a large and lovely new hatbox and placing it in my hands.

"From Dublin's fair city, where the hats are so pretty, my lady." I presented the smart leather box to my hostess with a grandiloquent gesture, ending in a formal curtsy, which made her laugh with delight.

She undid the strap and tore off the cover in a trice, revealing one of the most elegant Paris bonnets ever to grace an Irish head.

"Oh, my dear, I am quite overwhelmed. Just look at the feathers! Oh, the ribbons! And the quilling is so elegant. Thank you, thank you so very much." Lady Elizabeth was plainly enchanted.

"I thought that you might like it. I could hardly imagine a lady who would not," I remarked, relieved that my gift was such an obvious success.

"Do try it on, my lady," the pert Irish maid urged, as the two other girls, Chinese and very young, watched shyly under cover of their unpacking. Try it on she did, modeling it before the long glass in the bedroom, with much posing and arranging and flinging of long ribbons about her shoulders.

"I am sure that I have never seen such a *chapeau*. If only one wore such things to a ball. It is quite pretty enough to wear to one. Well, no matter! All of Bantry town shall see me in this ere long. I shall strut the High Street like a peacock."

"The other little gift shall have to wait until my big trunk is unpacked. I have brought you all the latest fashion magazines from Paris and London. I'm sure you shall enjoy them."

"Enjoy them," Lady Elizabeth cried. "Indeed I shall, for from them we will choose a style to be made up for the ball. There's to be a ball here in a month's time, you know, in honor, or so I suspect, of Nicholas' engagement to the Paget girl."

"Nicholas?" I questioned. "I'm sorry, but I do not know to whom you refer."

"But of course you don't! How very silly of me not to realize how out of touch I've been. You've forgotten all about him, although you actually met once—when you were four and he was nine. Nicholas is my son, the third Baronet Cheng. Oh, but never mind about him right now. He's off in London pursuing a young lady. I haven't thanked you yet for this delicious bonnet and for the magazines." Here she hugged me hard and kissed my cheek. "You are a dear, and the magazines shall be a godsend to me, for they say that the honorable Miss Paget is quite the fashion plate herself. Now I shall be every bit as stylish as she is, for Nicholas' sake."

She shook her head ruefully. "It is a bit of fashionable frippery like this that makes me realize just how far away from things Moondragon really is. Well, no matter. You and I shall be belles of the ball." With that, Lady Elizabeth gave me another light kiss on the cheek, and herding the servants

before her like an elegant goosegirl, left me alone to freshen up and change for dinner.

Fortunately, my hostess's natural ebullience, as eager and graceful and unaffected as that of a girl, had enabled me to recover from the initial shock of seeing once more "my Lady of the Dragon," as I had come to style her. Back in Dublin I had decided that she was merely a figment of the imagination, a product of my newly rediscovered clairvoyance. It had seemed reasonable to me that once I was actually at Moondragon, my mind would have no further need to continue playing tricks on me. Nothing, evidently, could be further from the truth, for unlike the other times I had seen her, I was not alone during these last two visitations. It was true, of course, that when she seemed to appear atop the roof of Moondragon as I watched the great house through the spy-glass aboard ship, it might well have been either a trick of my mind or some strange optical effect caused by the combination of lighting and magnification. This I doubted, but it was possible. If, on the other hand, she had appeared to me, it was in the company of another for the first time. Here at Moondragon she had definitely appeared before me while I was in the company of Lady Elizabeth and a veritable throng of bumping, thumping, overladen servants. Either my Lady of the Dragon was getting bolder or I was becoming progressively madder. I sincerely doubted the latter possibility, and the former made me rather uneasy. Still, I supposed, it was more acceptable in the long run that she become more and more of a reality than that I slip deeper and deeper into unreality.

I put aside these reflections and found I felt better once I had removed my traveling clothes and had donned a dressing gown *sans* stays and laces. Before calling for a maid to help me begin the process of dressing all over again for dinner, I sat down at the dressing table and gave myself a wry smile in the mirror. It was the irony of my situation that made me smile so resignedly. After all, it was a pretty pass to which I had come: I, haunted, of late by what must be the only Chinese ghost in Dublin, had come so far, to find myself—still haunted—in perhaps the only Chinese house in Ireland! Curiouser and curioser!

Lady Elizabeth had said that Moondragon was "far away

from things," and so it was, but that did not prevent its mistress from serving a dinner of surpassing taste and variety.

The best wines, courses of the finest and rarest fish and fowl, roasts and savories and sweets were served on matchless china and crystal and silver. The napery was of the finest damask linen woven with the ubiquitous dragon-and-moon motif. Even the pattern of the silver tableware represented the "moondragon," as it was referred to by Lady Elizabeth. "My late husband's people are descended from Chinese nobility, offspring of one of the last emperors of the Ming dynasty. The emblem of their house has been for centuries the imperial dragon of China bearing the orb of the moon in its teeth.

"It is a talisman of good fortune, and I'm afraid that all of us Chengs feel we must ever have our dear old dragon within our sight. When the Chengs were made gentlemen of the kingdom in the time of William and Mary, their coat of arms was designed in the form of a heraldic dragon rampant bearing a globe in his paws. It was the closest the Herald's College could come to the emblem of the family as it had been in China."

The story of the Chengs grew more fascinating with every new detail that I heard. Lady Elizabeth seemed disposed, now that dinner was nearly over, to tell something of the family history, and so I sought to encourage her. "I noticed the armorial bearing on the seals of the letters you sent me. Everything you tell me only serves to whet my appetite for more details of the Cheng family and its background."

"Oh, please! Not now, if you love me, Bess!" The man who spoke up thus feelingly with a slap of his napkin upon his thigh (which was draped, by the way, rather informally over the arm of his chair) was Captain Owen Sarsfield-Jones, younger brother to my hostess and evidently a more or less permanent guest at Moondragon. I had not yet got a clear impression of him at that time, but he had seemed pleasant enough up until this abrupt outburst of petulance, and had been a charming dinner companion to the two of us.

"If I hear one more time the history of that damned family with its trumpery dragons and so-called noble blood, I shall go quite mad," he went on, waxing more dramatic and insulting with each word. "They were a pack of slant-eyed, thievin' pirates, and that's all there is to it, Miss Fennora. Damn, Bess, you couldn't name one of those precious Chengs that was fit to polish an Irish gentleman's boots."

Lady Elizabeth was up in a flash to the full height of her tiny frame. Welsh fire glared from her angry eyes.

"Owen, you go too far. You will leave this table at once and not let me see you again before morning."

Slowly, in an insolent manner that led me to believe that scenes such as this were not uncommon between sister and brother, Captain Sarsfield-Jones rose, popped a walnut meat into his mouth, and with eyes still fixed rudely on his sister, picked up the sherry decanter and turned to leave.

"That uncommon good sherry, Deirdre, about to go down a common Irish gullet, was bought with gold belonging to my 'slant-eyed pirate' of a son. Were it not for the generosity of that son, the man you see before you would not have a shred on his back nor a tot of whiskey in his belly. So much for Irish gentlemen."

By way of reply, he flashed me a dazzling, winning smile that put me in mind of a small boy asking congratulations for a particularly fine bit of mischief. He then retired, slamming the door behind him. The instant he left, my hostess resumed her seat and turned to me.

"Please do forgive him, Deirdre. Owen is a very unhappy man, and for want of any other scapegoat, takes out a great deal of his bitterness upon the Chongs."

"He is my younger brother, and we were always very close. As a boy he was bitterly against my own family because of their encouragement of my marriage to William Cheng. He felt that my parents and older brother were willing to sell me into marriage. You see, what little there was left of our estate after the Great Famine was to go to my elder brother, Liam. That left Owen and me virtually penniless. My marriage was a godsend, for it not only gave me security for life, but I was able to buy a commission in the army for Owen. Instead of being grateful, he has always resented the Chongs' money, the more so since their bounty has made our fortune. Moreover, he has always felt that I married beneath me, that I have tainted myself and our blood."

"It has never occurred to him that I might actually have loved William Cheng, that I might actually have wanted to marry him. I did, you know!" Here her eyes filled to the brim with tears of sorrow for a moment, and then went dry again. "The only true joy that I've had in all these lonely years is watching my son grow up, though I see little of his father in Nicholas. Now, perhaps soon, he shall marry, and I shall have grandchildren."

"But I spin daydreams! Shall we retire to the parlor, my dear, and chat? We have so much of which to talk."

Her last words as we left the table were to echo in my ears often in the days and weeks to come. "Pay no attention to Owen, my dear child. He's quite harmless, you know."

A Darkness on the Soul

For on a sudden came a gasp for breath,
And stretching of the hands and blinded eyes,
And a great darkness falling on my soul.

—Barry Pain

It began that very night. I lay upon my bed, but the bed was a bed of rock, stiffening my backbone till I thought it would break, imparting a chill that froze my very marrow.

Above me in the impenetrable blackness, the weight of a thousand tons of stone oppressed me, ready to drop slowly down upon me with exquisite deliberateness, snapping and crushing my brittle bones like kindling.

My eyes, dry and hard as the kernels in a nutshell, saw nothing—not the faintest ray of light, not the least image that a mind might conjure in the dark of night. All was blackness, profound as the grave.

My feet, bound till their very bones were crushed, burned with an agony that sent hot flames of pain licking along my shrieking nerves.

Around my neck and bearing down upon my naked breast with implacable force, the Moondragon coiled, writhing like a living thing, its icy scales scraping my skin till it flaked away like dust.

My lungs were filled to bursting with the foul stench of graves, and yet I could not breathe, nor gasp, nor writhe, nor move the least part of me.

My voice was stopped; no scream could I utter to release the agony and terror of my body and soul. I lay eternally, it seemed, in an ecstasy of excruciating torment.

Was there never to be an end? Having died, would I wait forever for Death to come for me?

Such was the dream that I dreamed, such the tortures that I endured on my first night under the great, high pagoda roof of Moondragon.

Long after I struggled into wakefulness, I lay gasping like a drowning man who is spent with the effort of rising from the dim ocean's bottom to the light and air above.

Trembling, gasping, both laughing and crying with the sheer relief of having freed myself from that monstrous nightmare, I let my eyes rove through the unlit room, reveling in that merciful, comforting darkness, so unlike the oblivion that I had sensed in the utter blackness of my dream. Moonlight entered my room in long, slanted rays, cutting through the gloom from the shuttered doors of the portico. Tiny gleams, like stars, leaped out of the dark, glowing from the silver brushes on my dressing table, the brass candlestick beside my bed, the knobs of the doors. Each little point of light seemed like a ray of heavenly glory, by its very contrast reminding me once more of the impenetrable darkness of that Cave of Death within which my dream had imprisoned me.

Hours later—perhaps only minutes, I knew not—I drifted into a sleep; pure, dreamless sleep that left me as refreshed when I awoke from it as if I had never had the nightmare at all.

With the sunlight pouring across the stone floor of the portico, my bedroom and sitting-room doors opened to the glorious new day, I could but believe that it was merely a dream of having dreamed that haunted me now. Nothing could have disturbed my peaceful slumbers. Surely, at any rate, nothing would again.

Captain Sarsfield-Jones was not at breakfast that morning. Lady Elizabeth had evidently not expected to see him, since we neither of us mentioned his absence, and a place had not been set for him.

Breakfast over, my hostess began the morning by conferring with Mrs. Ling in the tiny kitchen offices at the back of the house. These two little rooms, so badly served by the north light that entered the two small windows high up in the thick granite walls, were lit by tapers at all times. The one room was Mrs. Ling's own sitting room, the other a small office where she did the household accounts, planned menus,

and conducted the household business. Beyond these rooms was a long tiled corridor that ran from the kitchen (housed in a separate, small granite building set close against the great side wall of Moondragon itself) past these offices to a pantry that served the breakfast and dining rooms. The floor plan, though confusing to me at first, was actually quite well thought out and efficient.

Virtually no household services—cooking, laundry, servants' quarters, or anything else of that nature—were housed in the main building. Each separate task was performed in one of a cluster of small, attractive, Chinese-style outbuildings at the back and to one side of the great house.

Of the servants, only the housekeeper, Mrs. Ling, and Lady Elizabeth's Irish maid, Kathleen, slept in Moondragon itself. The rest of the servants—gardeners, farmers, stable attendants, and the like—had their own little villages, one for the Chinese and one for the Irish, on the estate. Each village comprised small but comfortable cottages for the married couples and their families, and clean, well-kept dormitories for the unmarried servants.

Thus, the house, grounds, lands, villages—all were kept immaculate. As Lady Elizabeth explained to me, everyone from the humblest shepherd to the haughty Mrs. Ling herself was made to feel that Moondragon belonged to him; each, therefore, had a vested interest in keeping the vast estate in perfect order. For each of them it was home, and in most cases had been so for generations. There were actually some old people on the grounds who had been born on the estate and had never in their lives left it, so vast and varied was the life it offered, even to its humblest denizens.

I had whiled away the idle half-hour of my hostess's confabulation with Mrs. Ling in the entrance hall and main reception rooms, gazing in awe at the vitrines of oriental jades, bronzes, and carvings that seemed to be set everywhere against the walls of paneled mahogany. Above me, huge bronze chandeliers in the forms of coiling dragons or strange flying creatures depended from the immense beams of the ceilings. These immense rooms of the ground floor—entrance hall, reception room, dining room, library, and parlor—were all on an almost gigantic scale and filled nearly to overflowing with furniture and *objets d'art* of the most ornate and indeed bizarre nature. Only the twenty-foot ceilings and the huge scale of the rooms themselves kept the furnishings in them from being totally overpowering. As it was, the

overall effect was at least breathtaking. I still could not make up my mind whether I actually liked Moondragon or not. Living there, I suspected, would be either heaven or hell, depending on how quickly one developed a taste for Chinese art.

Finally, Lady Elizabeth joined me in the reception room, where I was perusing a tall enclosed cabinet of precious Chinese porcelain.

"Those are lovely pieces, aren't they? Ming porcelain was the finest, you know. It has never been equaled, let alone surpassed." My hostess spoke with great pride of the treasures of her late husband's ancestors. Clearly, out of love and devotion, she had made herself a Cheng in more than name only.

Now she turned, and I saw that a woman stood a few feet behind her. I knew, even before introductions were made, that I was about to meet the notorious Mrs. Ling at last. I drew in my breath as if girding for an ordeal. Actually, the meeting turned out to be brief and painless.

She was tall, far taller than either Lady Elizabeth or I, and slender with pale ivory skin, smooth and free from wrinkles despite her nearly sixty years. Her hair was jet black, drawn back smoothly into a severe knot at the nape of her neck. Her one visible eye was almond-shaped and as hard and brilliant as the eye of a parrot. The other—mercifully, from what Captain Vreeland had said—was covered by a black silk patch. Her mouth was hard and cold, the lips small, thin, and seeming always to be just on the verge of pursing. She wore a long, unadorned blue silk coat, shapeless but rather tight-fitting, and trousers(!) of the same blue fabric. She wore white stockings and slippers of black satin on her tiny feet.

Somehow, looking at those pursed lips, the hard, penetrating eye, I could readily believe that seven men had died after committing an outrage upon the person of such a one as Mrs. Ling.

Lady Elizabeth introduced the woman as her housekeeper and friend, but I don't think that any one of the three of us believed the latter description. Mrs. Ling hardly looked a friendly sort. Her sole remark in reply to my cordial greeting was brief to say the least, stated in a monotone, and all in one breath at that.

"I am happy to meet you, miss. Please let me know if I can be of any service during your stay at Moondragon." She spoke in a high, thin, even voice, and had not only the most

correct diction but absolutely no accent at all. This was the more remarkable, since all the Chinese at Moondragon spoke their own language, no matter how long they and their families had been in Ireland. Their English was heavily accented, and I had already noted that it was sometimes easier for my hostess to understand her servants in their own tongue than in hers. Turning away from me, Mrs. Ling addressed her mistress. "May I be excused, my lady? The staff must be seen to." Lady Elizabeth nodded, and Mrs. Ling, turning heel, left without further ado.

"She really is a treasure, Deirdre, but she's had a hard life. One must make allowances for her." Even as one does for Captain Sarsfield-Jones, I thought rather sardonically. It was not easy, I mused, being mistress of Moondragon.

After having shown me about the house for some time, Lady Elizabeth retired to write letters until luncheon was served. I had a similar duty to perform myself, and so I mounted the carved staircase and withdrew to my cheery green-and-yellow chinoiserie sitting room, where I might write for an hour in solitude.

Set against the outside wall of the room, between the two open doorways to the portico beyond, was a small but ornate escritoire. Each panel of each drawer and door was peopled with a parade of graceful Chinese ladies and courtly gentlemen, each fashioned of highly detailed inlaid work with delicate carved and painted ivory faces. Opening the little desk, I saw before me an array of fine stationery, vellum, like that of the letters that Lady Elizabeth had sent to me. Seals there were, and wax, pens, ink, and blotters. All the display before me calculated to tempt the most dilatory correspondent to her task. All that, yet I wrote not a word!

There I sat, paper before me, ink to hand, pen poised to begin, but—

"Top of a cheery good mornin' to ye, Miss Fennora."

Captain Sarsfield-Jones's handsome head popped in through the open door of the portico on my right-hand side. Rather taken aback by the sudden, uninvited appearance of a man in the room right next my bedroom, I sent the pen skittering from my hand, ink splattering from its nib across the blank sheet before me. The captain made no attempt to help me out of my predicament, but instead laughed like the very devil as I blotted and wiped and tried to set things in order again.

"Really, captain, you are a . . ."

"A what, Miss Deirdre?" he urged, as my remark trailed off for want of words.

"I prefer not to say, since it would lay grave doubts upon the honor of your mother—"

"Ho, ho, watch it now," he chided with the wagging of an upraised finger and a merry twinkle in his clear blue eyes.

"—and upon the masculinity of your father," I continued levelly.

He laughed in spite of himself. "You are a cheeky wench. I can see that I'm really goin' ta enjoy your visit."

"Tell me, captain. Are you always so informal as to enter a lady's sitting room uninvited?"

He smiled wickedly. "There are some ladies prefer invitin' a man ta other rooms, and for other purposes than sittin', Miss Deirdre." Here he nodded toward my bedroom doors.

I would not be piqued by this man! "Indeed! By your manners, sir, I would imagine that your only acquaintanceship with a lady—other than myself, of course—comes by virtue of having a sister who is one."

"Tender, sweet bitch! Have you got a tongue in your head! And the ready wit to use it, and cover yourself as well! By damn, Bess has struck a bargain, fetchin' you from Dublin."

"Up, girl. Let's get a better look at ye." Here he pulled me up by the two hands, amazing me with the strength of his rather long, slight body and the energy he displayed by that sudden move. By his drawling speech and indolent manner, I had imagined that he must have given up strenuous effort some long time ago.

Releasing me with one hand, he swirled me around bodily with the other, appraising my appearance with the eye of a man who knew horses well—and women.

"Would you like to see my teeth?" I asked acidly. He was really making me angry—or was he?

"No," he replied infuriatingly, "I noticed 'em at dinner last night. They're quite good—even and white. How old are ya, gel, twenty-five?"

"I'll be twenty-seven shortly."

"Ah, still young enough to be honest."

"And how old are you, captain?" I asked sweetly, shaking myself free of his rather strong grip.

"Me? I'm forty-t . . . ah, eh, let's see. I'll be forty my next birthday. That's in ten months' time," he added hastily.

"Ah," I retorted nastily. "Grown old enough to lie. How sad."

"Oh, gel, you've said the wrong thing. I've been old enough to lie for a long time, and so, I might say, have you. In fact, have you?"

"What, lied?" I asked, rather at a loss to understand his meaning but nevertheless expecting some trick in his question.

"No, lain? With a man."

"Get out of here this instant! Really, sir, you have gone too far! I will not tolerate . . ." He let me sputter on for a few more or less unintelligible expletives, and then went ahead as if he had asked nothing more of me than the name of my pet cat.

"Ah, yes, well, I can see that you have not. Let me recommend it to ya, lass. There's nothin' like lyin' with a good man to bring the roses—"

Here I managed to push him out the door onto the portico and lock it in his face.

"—back into those pale and wasted cheeks."

He had popped that devilish face, still grinning, right back into the room through the other door, to the left of the desk. "And you've got such a fine figure, gel, it's a shame ta waste the sight of it on a chambermaid."

"Get out of here." I snatched up a little porcelain inkpot from the secretery and waved it at him with a threatening gesture.

"You wouldn't dare!" he challenged, standing his ground in the doorway, arms akimbo and a triumphant smirk on his mischievous face.

That did it! Something inside me snapped, and I sent the inkpot hurtling squarely toward that damnable auburn head of his.

Unfortunately, he ducked. "Damn, you'd have struck me square in the face. What aim!" he added admiringly.

I had little time to accept his approbation of my athletic abilities, for as I watched in something akin to horror, the inkpot, still tightly lidded, went sailing in a graceful arc right through the portico, hovered high in the sunny, late-morning air, and began a plummeting descent into the courtyard below.

I let out a long cry of dread, and with Captain Sarsfield-Jones beside me, rushed to the wooden balustrade just in time to see the little green porcelain pot land with a splattering

smash on the cobblestones right before the feet of the handsomest and—right now—the angriest man I had ever seen in my life.

At precisely that moment, the door to my room burst open behind us, and Lady Elizabeth rushed in joyfully.

"Deirdre, my darling. Nicholas has just arrived unexpectedly, and in good time for lunch. Oh, what a lovely time we shall have."

She could not understand for the life of her why I stood rigid with mortification and Captain Sarsfield-Jones, caught in a paroxysm of laughter, literally rolled upon the flagstone floor of the portico.

Needless to say, luncheon was not the joyous affair that Lady Elizabeth had envisioned. I, considerably chastened by my horrible behavior, was barely tolerated or acknowledged by my rather haughty host, despite the attempts of his mother to put things aright between us. Captain Sarsfield-Jones, still sober this early in the meal was, to say the least, subdued in the presence of his wealthy nephew, while Lady Elizabeth, adoring as only a widowed mother can be, tried to fill in the gaps of silence during the meal.

Sir Nicholas Cheng, when he regarded his uncle or me at all, did so from hooded eyes of dark, fathomless brown. They were long eyes like an Oriental's, but larger and fringed with curling black lashes that any woman might envy. His features were strong and rugged, the jaw broad and heavy, the cheekbones high and wide, his brow heavy and his forehead betokening a formidable brain. His lips were full and wide, and, like his eyes, betrayed his nearly half-Chinese blood. He had a dark complexion and jet-black hair worn straight back and rather long, right, in fact, to his collar. Except for the fact that he was clean-shaven, he reminded me a great deal of the explorer and scholar Sir Richard Francis Burton, whom I had met briefly in Egypt with my father. Like Richard Burton, Sir Nicholas Cheng had a fiercely rugged handsomeness that came as much from the animal magnetism of his eyes and personality as it did from his features. This, however, did not mean that either one of them was a likable person. Burton had been totally self-absorbed, and an eccentric. So far, I could say almost the same for Sir Nicholas. He certainly had no humor in him.

The burden of the tiresome luncheon conversation was carried by Sir Nicholas Cheng replying to his mother's specific

questions. He made no gratuitous remarks of his own, but during the awkward lulls would eye me disapprovingly, and his uncle with an expression of distaste mingled with suspicion. Finally, intuitively, I realized that he was suspecting the worst of my behavior on the portico with the captain.

I caught his eye and glared in what I hoped was an expression of hurt, indignant hauteur. His expression in reply read: Well, what else can I think?

It was too exasperating! To have defended myself from a rogue and a rascal, and then to be suspected of some base intrigue with him instead! I broke right in over some idle question of my hostess.

"Really, Sir Nicholas, you do me wrong. Have you so little sense of humor that you cannot laugh at the incident? Must you sit here, to your mother's discomfort, not to mention mine, thinking vile thoughts about the behavior of your own uncle and brooding over an unintentioned accident that did no more harm than to waste a penny's worth of ink, break a small pot, and—"

"... and spatter my boots and trousers with ink, Miss Fennora."

"Your boots can be polished and your trousers cleaned. In fact, they are probably even now being seen to, so cannot you accept my apology with good grace and some smattering of humor?" "Smattering" was an ill-chosen word.

"Smattering or spattering, Miss Fennora?" my host shot back.

"If that is an example of your wit, sir—"

"Wit? Humor? Whoever said that Sir Nicholas Cheng had any humor?" The captain raised his glass and polished off his wine at a gulp. Feeling pleased with the whole situation—or perhaps only at my having stirred up the incident again—he filled his glass sloppily and laughed. "Little Nicky Cheng with a sense of humor. What will they think of next?"

"Shut up, Owen." Sir Nicholas' voice had a deadly edge to it that brought even his uncle up short. Then, softly, with exaggerated courtesy he nodded to me. "Do go on, Miss Fennora. Pray tell me how I should react to the greeting I received at your hands this morning?"

"Oh, do pray tell him, Miss Fennora," Captain Sarsfield-Jones mimicked, downing his third or fourth glass of wine.

"Will you shut up?" I retorted, exasperated by the position of being at the mercy of these two men, the one a cowardly,

drunken rogue and the other a spoiled, haughty, humorless oriental Adonis. Lady Elizabeth was speechless and quite out of the picture except for an occasional gasp at what she considered to be our shocking language toward one another.

"Clearly, sir, I had no intention of hitting you. If anyone was the object of my wrath, plain common sense must tell you that I was aiming for this tittering dissolute across from me."

The captain put a finger to his lips and moaned in mockery.

"Having ducked with an agility that proves that he had not taken a drink before this noon, the captain was saved from harm. The missile, however, sailed on, as missiles will do, until it met with a resistant object, in this case, the cobblestones at your feet. Since you still fail to see the lighter side of all this, will you at least for your mother's sake take me out of Coventry so that I can stop feeling like a naughty child or a fallen woman?"

"You threw the inkpot at Owen?"

"Yes."

"Damn near hit me, too. Would have smashed my face in, if I hadn't ducked." The captain had drunk enough by now to begin feeling sorry for himself.

"Nearly hit him?" Sir Nicholas asked with some interest.

"Would have, if he hadn't ducked it. He's agile when he's sober."

"When is that?" Sir Nicholas asked, nodding at his uncle, who sat bleary-eyed over his fifth glass of wine.

"Nicholas, you really are too disrespectful of your uncle," Lady Elizabeth chided softly.

"Disrespectful!" Suddenly Sir Nicholas Cheng's impassive face split wide open in a broad grin, his head shook, and he was convulsed in laughter, tears streaming from his long, dark eyes. "Disrespectful," he chortled again.

When he had quite recovered himself, he looked at me very seriously. "Now, that was funny, Miss Fennora. That was funny."

"You and your uncle are quite alike, aren't you, Sir Nicholas?" I asked quietly, not amused.

"Are we?" he asked in astonishment. "How so?"

"You each have a great deal of humor at the other fellow's expense, yet none at all about yourselves."

Luncheon ended rather abruptly.

In the next few days I saw rather little of Lady Elizabeth until afternoon, for her sole occupation in the mornings now became that of attending to her son and his plans for the ball she had mentioned.

I saw even less of Sir Nicholas, who preferred to leave me quite alone. It was obvious that he did not like me, and handsome as he was, I didn't care much for him. His mother was always smoothing things over as best she could and was constantly apologizing for one of us or the other. It pained me to see her so caught in the middle, but it seemed to be her lot in life to be a peacemaker in a difficult family. I added no comfort to her lot, for it was becoming clear that as well as she and Owen and I got on, we none of us got on with Sir Nicholas, nor he with us. Somehow one pair of us or the other was constantly bickering. Poor Lady Elizabeth.

Owen, as I had come to call her brother, was in constant attendance on me when I would permit. He had a delightful sense of fun, now I had got the hang of it (or perhaps only by contrast to his nephew), and he was far less rude than I might have expected him to be from his first intrusion into my sitting room.

Of a morning, he would come to my portico doors, knock, and ask entrance. Demurring in what was rapidly becoming a ritual, I would suggest the alternative of a walk around the portico. On nice days we would walk down the broad outside stairs that led from the veranda down the back of the great house, into the formal walled Chinese garden behind.

With Owen's guidance I had come to know the environs of Moondragon quite well. Often, as I came to feel more secure in his company, and he, out of a certain respect for both my temper and my studied aloofness, had become more gentlemanly, I would permit him to take me riding across the rolling meadows and orchards and bridle paths of the estate. Only along the high cliffs before the great house itself did I refuse to ride, for three times along those dangerous cliffs I had seen my Lady of the Dragon, and I feared lest she try to lure me to my death on the rocks in the churning waters of Bantry Bay far below. Nothing in her demeanor had put this morbid idea into my head, for she remained as benign a vision as ever she had been, but the luring of unsuspecting victims to their deaths by spectral shapes was such a prevalent theme in certain forms of literature that I preferred not to tempt the Fates.

On one particular morning, after I had been at Moondragon well over a week, I chose, after our ride, to explore the environs of the stables and carriage house. Owen left me to my own devices, having been sober now till nearly noon, and no doubt feeling that his abstinence called for a reward in the form of a preluncheon sherry.

Like every other outbuilding at Moondragon, the long, low carriage house was of granite with red tile pagoda roof. The several sets of heavy wooden doors to the building stood open while men worked at refurbishing many of the coaches and carriages for the service they would see in the arrival of Sir Nicholas' guests for the ball to be given in three weeks' time.

Something to my left as I approached the building from the direction of the stables caught my eye. It was the unfortunate boy Hannibal Ling. He seemed to have been watching me for some time, and I wished uneasily that Owen Sarsfield-Jones had remained with me, for the boy's presence made me uncomfortable. Owen, in common with Captain Vreeland, loathed the poor half-wit, and whenever he caught the creature following us along the bridle paths, as it was his wont to do, Owen was as likely as not to shy a stone at him or charge him with his horse, riding crop at the ready. Neither of these recourses had any great effect, for inevitably, although he would disappear for a while, he would pop up in some other spot along our path.

Now the boy dogged my steps across the courtyard, trying with gesticulations and repulsive, guttural sounds to attract my attention. I could not be cruel and ignore him any longer. There was no danger of his harming me, with a dozen servants, coachmen, and grooms in the immediate vicinity, so I turned and looked at him inquiringly.

A grunt issued from his wet, lolling lips, and he pointed with a filthy forefinger toward the one set of doors in the long coach house that remained closed. He ran toward them and back to me, urging me toward them with his awkward attempts at speech. Once more he ran toward them and back again, putting me in mind of a dog trying to communicate some urgent desire to an unwitting master.

Reluctantly I approached the closed doors, and as I did, seeing that I meant to follow him, he flung them open before me. At first I thought the cubicle was empty. The dazzling sunlight behind me cast my shadow across the dusty, bare floor and at first prevented me from discerning any object

within. As my eyes gradually grew accustomed to the darkness in the interior, I saw that far in the back of the long, narrow room, pushed against the gray stone side wall, was a small, old-fashioned pony trap.

Gingerly I approached it, aware that something in the back of my mind was troubling me. This trap had some significance that for the moment escaped me. Hannibal Ling stood beside it, giggling and nodding obscenely. His long, oriental eyes glittered with glee. Ignoring him as best I could, I examined the little vehicle. Even before I saw the dusty patches of whitish mold, I could smell the mildew that covered the leather seats and rotting Indian-rubber tires. The body of it had once been maroon lacquer, but now the paint hung in huge, blistered chips. The yellow traces and wheel spokes were chipped and begrimed. Layer upon layer of dusty cobwebs anchored the little pony trap to the walls against which it had been pushed so long ago.

Hannibal Ling looked up past my shoulder, and with a frightened cry ran out the doors and across the courtyard. There, silhouetted against the bright sunlight that flooded the doorway, her long figure casting an even longer shadow down the length of the floor of the narrow coach room, was the housekeeper, Mrs. Ling.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice was impassive, showing neither anger nor even curiosity in its tone.

"Hannibal seemed to want to show me this." I turned and indicated the little pony trap.

"It fascinates him." She reflected. "Odd, he has never shown it to anyone before." She regarded me for a long moment, her one eye glittering in the shadows, her lips pursed shrewdly. "Yes, I see now why. He is a grown man now. It is inevitable that a pretty woman—perhaps especially a white woman—should attract him."

"Mrs. Ling!"

"Do not be offended, miss. I mean no harm or insult to you, but only to warn you."

"Warn me?" I asked, my throat going dry at the thought she sought to put in my mind.

"You see the way he is. He has never been dangerous, never hurt anyone—a girl especially—but he is nineteen and the inheritor of a terrible curse. It is well that I watch him more closely now." She walked hesitatingly toward the ruined trap.

"I would never wish any woman to experience at the hands of my son what I experienced at the hands of his . . . his fathers."

I drew in my breath. It sounded harsh and loud in the quiet little room.

"You have been told, have you not?" She asked this with her back to me, her one eye still fixed upon that mildewed little carriage.

I nodded, and then, realizing that she could not see me, replied aloud.

"Perhaps if I had been a normal woman, pretty enough to have been loved by a man, I could have survived that ordeal unscathed in spirit. There must be women who have, but I . . . I had never known a man. Thirty-eight I was, and I had not known a man. Suddenly I was surrounded by seven men—Irishmen—drunk and vile and filthy. The filthiness of them was the worst . . . and the smell. The weight of them upon me, each working his will within me time and time again."

Involuntarily I reached out my hand to steady myself against the little trap. As my fingers touched the spongy leather of the top of the seat a thrill went through them, coursing up my veins until it reached my brain. Suddenly, though my eyes remained open, the coach-house interior evaporated from before my sight. I was on a darkened road with just a thin sliver of a moon illuminating the clear blue-black of the early-evening sky. Spring smells floated on the air, combined with the acrid smell of bodies and whiskey. Shuffling footsteps scurried away through the underbrush at the side of the road. The pony trap, shiny and new, shifted under the touch of my fingers. Slowly, painfully, a beaten and bloody form pulled itself into the back of the little carriage, even as I watched. The form was that of a woman, by the few tattered rags that remained to cover her bruised and violated body. Only the searing sound of her labored breathing rent the night air. By some miracle she was able to reach for the reins with one bloody hand and gain control of the oblivious, grazing pony. With a little clicking sound, the woman urged the pony on. The carriage slid from underneath my fingers and began a slow progress down the road. As the mildewed little trap slipped under the weight of my hand, a rain of dust and paint chips clattered to the floor. I do have "the sight" I thought, panicked by the unnerving vision I had

just witnessed. Mrs. Ling still stood at my side, lost in a vision of her own.

"My body survived that night. My son came into being on that night. Do you wonder that he is what he is? That I cannot keep him clean? He was conceived in filth, and like his fathers, filthy.

"If he were to follow them and do to any woman—to you, miss—what was done to me, I should have to slay my very own flesh."

She turned toward me, and I could see one huge tear sparkling in the corner of that one birdlike eye. Slowly I approached her, placing my arm about her slim shoulder in a small gesture of sympathy and comfort. For one instant she bowed her head upon my breast, and then, tearless and dry-eyed, she resumed her cold dignity.

"I shall look to my son, miss. Have no fear." Without another word she was gone.

As I walked thoughtfully back toward the great house, I noticed that one teardrop stained the bosom of my riding habit. By the time I had come to the guardian lions at the front entrance to Moondragon, it had evaporated in the hot noonday sun, and although it left no visible trace, it seemed that that teardrop still formed an unspoken bond between myself and Mrs. Ling.

That night there came that terrible darkness once more upon my soul.

The bed, a bed of rock; the stiffening, the breaking of my brittle back. The marrow-chilling cold.

Above me, still, the omnipresent weight poised to crush and snap my dried bones.

Blind, kernel-hard eyes lost in a blackness so profound that my soul seemed trapped within it.

The agony of my bound and withered feet, the hot pain shooting along my nerves.

The icy writhing of the Moondragon around my throat, scraping the dusty skin of my naked breast till it bared the bones.

Foul the stench of graves in my bursting lungs, silent my throat that ached to scream out my agony.

Was there never to be an end? Having died, would I wait forever for Death to come for me?

Once more I awoke in the night, crying with relief that the long torment of that hideous dream had ended. Once more, mercifully, I slept again, deeply and dreamlessly, only to

awake as refreshed from a few hours' sleep as if I had slept the whole night away in perfect peace. How long would this go on? I wondered. Would this nightmare persist? How long could I dream such dreams and still be sane?

Family Secrets Revealed

... he laid the treasure in a secret place . . .
and went his way . . . and there beneath the earth,
a temptation and a terror, that treasure still . . .

—H. B. Drake

For the few weeks between my arrival at Moondragon and the expected visit of the Honorable Miss Paget and her party, Lady Elizabeth and I spent many a long happy afternoon between luncheon and teatime planning our toilettes for the coming ball, the fashion magazines from Paris having yielded up their secrets to our willing brains and the skilled fingers of Lady Elizabeth's needlewomen.

As the day of the expected arrival grew near, however, strange undercurrents made themselves felt in the atmosphere of the great house. My hostess, normally cheerful as a wren except for the moments when she must arbitrate among her brother and son and me, was gravely concerned over some matter that she kept to herself. I could only guess by her looks that it had much to do with her son.

Owen Sarsfield-Jones blew hot and cold; paced about like a man with much on his mind, which amused me no end. Heretofore, I had doubted that he used his mind very much at all. Of a sudden, his ready, superficial wit and studied bravura seemed to go by the board, and he became solemn as a churchwarden, nearly as sober as the proverbial judge in his habits. I wasn't at all sure I liked the change. There is a place in this dreary world for rogues, after all. Once Lady Elizabeth made a grave error and chanced to remark on this change in his demeanor. This so unsettled him that he returned for a few hectic days to his former state—humorous,

rude, drunken, and, by the hours of his nightly returns to the house, back to his usual carousals in Glencannis or Adrigole or wherever his fancy took him. Despite these few violent swingings from apparent sobriety to licentiousness on his part, Owen remained as very nearly a perfect gentleman toward me as it was possible for one of his nature to be. I was grateful, of course, and tried to encourage his loftier side with a warm and kindly response.

Sir Nicholas Cheng was another story, however. No man was ever more insufferable than he, though mercifully we had little to do with each other, save at meals. I had ample leisure to observe him in his habitat, so to speak, and what I saw I heartily detested. As his mother ruled Moondragon effortlessly with the aid of love and a kind heart, her son strode the place like its true master, capricious and arbitrary, authoritarian and demanding.

Despite the fact that he was something under six feet in height, he was a broad, strong man and seemed to fill even that great house with his presence, strutting the huge rooms and wide halls bellowing orders in Chinese, English, or Gaelic, as the race of his servitor of the moment warranted; checking to see that every taper was straight in every chandelier, that viands, enough for an army waited upon the arrival of his guests, that there was no dust under the carpets or dirt behind the pageboys' ears. In short, there was not one corner, one pot, one inch of Moondragon that had not been personally seen to by the keen black eyes of Nicholas Cheng. I half-expected that soon I myself would be the object of his rigid inspection. However, either his total indifference to me personally or his wariness of my strong temper kept him clear of me. I felt, I must admit, a certain resentment and pique at his neglect, for I confess that I had a small secret desire to challenge the almighty authority of the temperamental Baronet Cheng.

He drove his mother to distraction and his uncle to fits of derisive laughter (behind Sir Nicholas' back, at any rate, for unless egged on by your obedient servant, Owen was properly subdued and even occasionally obsequious before his haughty nephew). I even went so far as to suggest that he had missed his calling and should become a chambermaid. Only Mrs. Ling, who bore the full brunt of his officiousness and incessant preoccupation with the details of housekeeping, seemed able to cope with him. She managed this by the simple expediency of acceding to his every wish—or whim!—obeying his

every order, pacifying his every concern, with the gravest face imaginable (not that that was a difficult task for the impulsive Mrs. Ling). This was, of course, easy for her, in a way, because all she then had to do was issue the proper order to the proper member of the staff, and it was as good as done.

I began to see why Captain Vreeland had said the Chengs left nothing to chance, and were, he thought, more than half-Chinese by nature. He surely had had Sir Nicholas in mind when he spoke thus. As I watched him storm through his great house day after day, hurling orders and invective on all sides, I had a clear picture of the blood that coursed through his veins.

He was of the seed of men who had once ruled China, the mightiest nation of the Orient. Like those men, he lived surrounded with all the luxuries of the East and all the serving hands that any despot might wish. All the beauties and treasure of China lined the walls of his palace, and he reveled in it as one born so high. Then, too, he was of the seed of men who had lost their empire and gone to sea as pirates. This I could see in him, too—a sort of desperate, devil-may-care wildness, as if there was a great hunger in his blood for some nameless thing that was lost to him but toward which he still strove blindly, defiant of the ultimate futility of it all. Well could I believe that but a few generations earlier his forefathers had risen so high and fallen so low. With what ease, I thought as I watched him one day from the balustrade that overlooked the lofty main hall of Moondragon, would Sir Nicholas Cheng have paced the teakwood deck of some exotic eastern pirate ship, shouting orders to small, agile yellow men in the rigging, flogging miscreants with a soul of ice and eyes of fire! He was a born autocrat, and somehow, even in this enlightened ninth decade of the nineteenth century, he managed to live more lustily, rule more powerfully in his domain than half the monarchs of Europe in theirs. I could hardly keep from a grudging admiration of his tyrannous power and the unconscious art with which he wielded it. After all, had I not often hectored my own poor maids and sent little Eileen jumping with my breakfast tray of a morning?

"He does so want everything to be just right for these next few days," Lady Elizabeth remarked more to herself than me, and in apparent response to the sound of her son's booming voice reverberating up the stairs and into her bedroom from somewhere in the cavernous rooms below.

She swirled about carefully upon the footstool on which

she perched before a long looking glass while a seamstress adjusted the hem of her rose-colored Shantung-silk ball gown.

"I must say, it is a masterpiece, Lady Elizabeth. Whatever your son's fiancée-to-be may wear, she cannot be lovelier than you." I heartily meant every word. My hostess had a bloom on her that would have become a twenty-year-old. The rose of her gown glowed in her pale cheeks, and her bright Welsh eyes were hot with delight at her own image in the mirror.

"You do not think the gown too plain?" she asked apprehensively, eyeing the bustle with concern.

"Never," I rejoined, recalling to mind that the elegant quilting on the bonnet I had given her had set Lady Elizabeth in a spin from which the needlewomen of Moondragon had not yet recovered. Yards and yards of ruffles and pleatings and fancified ribbons had been sewn and pressed and sewn again by a bevy of weary women. Much of this elaborate embellishment had found its way onto the very ball gown that she now modeled before the long glass in her cool blue bedroom.

"Oh, then it is too fancy! Ought I to do without the silk roses?" she asked, swinging first one way and then the other in her desire to look perfection.

"Surely not. I truly think that it is just the very loveliest gown I have ever seen, and perfectly suited to you as it is."

In this, all the maids and needlewomen present vociferously concurred, though perhaps as much from self-interest as from that of their apprehensive mistress. Just then the sound of a horse galloping up the road toward the house drifted through the open doors of the bedroom.

"Whoever can that be?" Lady Elizabeth asked. "No one is expected."

Curious myself, for we had had no visitors since Sir Nicholas himself arrived, I ran out the bedroom doors and across the portico, arriving at the balustrade in time to see Captain Vreeland, looking uncomfortable but nevertheless rather magnificent in spanking-new riding clothes and gleaming new boots, come to a halt and dismount before the great guardian lions below and to the right of me.

He looked up, scanning the broad portico above him, and caught sight of me with an eager anticipation that immediately faded to a slight smile and a friendly wave when he saw my features and realized who I was. He had hoped for a glimpse of someone else, I surmised. He went up the marble

stairs just then and disappeared from sight as a servant led his horse away toward the stables.

I came back into the room as my hostess, whirling about once more, eyed herself in the mirror. Abstractedly she asked, "Who was that, my dear? Do you think the sleeves will do?"

"The sleeves are perfection, Lady Elizabeth, and it was only Captain Vreeland arriving to speak to Sir Nicholas. I had forgot about it, but I remember now that I overheard him send a messenger off to Bantry this morning to fetch the captain here."

"Captain Vreeland? Oh, this will really never do!" She was so distressed and flustered that in hopping suddenly from her precarious perch on the footstool, she missed her footing and nearly toppled into one of the seamstresses working on the hem of her gown. As it was, she spilled the pin box and sent hundreds of pins scattering in all directions. Ignoring the confusion about her, she ran to her dressing table, poked at her hair, pinched her already-glowing cheeks, and bit some color into her lips.

"Do come with me, Deirdre. Nicholas really must learn to be more thoughtful. Not to tell me that Captain Vreeland is expected, when he knows that I should have a special tea for him—for any company, of course." All this she uttered breathlessly as we hurried down the broad stairs in search of her son and the sea captain.

"Lady Elizabeth," I called to her in an urgent whisper, "does it not occur to you that you still have on your ball gown?"

"Why, yes, dear. Does it not suit? Does it not look just right?"

"It looks lovely, but . . ."

"Then all is well, my dear," she replied, giving me a sly smile that told me much. These last few minutes, when I had thought her so distracted, she had known exactly what she was doing. I had the feeling I was about to watch a master in the art of female ingenuity and deception go into action, and I somehow felt that I was going to enjoy whatever ensued. How right I was!

She paused at the foot of the stairs, turning coolly in the direction of the stately red, gold, and mahogany parlor (from which place issued the loud and argumentative voice of Sir Nicholas Cheng), and approached the partially open doors.

"Stay right behind me, child," she whispered as she thrust open the heavy double doors. The room beyond, lit by long

brilliant golden rays of afternoon sunlight that came streaming in from the row of windows high up in the paneled walls, seemed immediately less somber and stately for Lady Elizabeth's entrance. She filled the room with a roseate glow of gown and cheek and high spirit. How much I hoped at that minute that upon reaching her years, I might still retain so much vivacity and beauty.

"Nicholas, darling. Is the gown quite right now, do you think? Oh, Captain Vreeland, how charming. Nicholas didn't tell me that you were expected." She ignored Nicholas and swept gracefully over to the captain, offering her little hand in greeting. He took it gallantly, kissed it self-consciously, and blushed beet red, his warm blue eyes appraising her with frank approval. "It is a pleasure to see you, Lady Elizabeth."

"Mother, can you not see that the captain and I are engaged in discussing matters of business?" Nicholas protested in as gentle a manner as he was able to muster, considering his obvious annoyance at our interruption.

"And important matters they must be, I'm sure, darling, but this gown must be right for the ball, and a man's opinion is needed." Here she dared to shoot a coquettish glance at Captain Vreeland, who grinned a toothy grin and looked at his new boots.

"The gown is lovely, Mother. Now, why don't you—?" Sir Nicholas began.

"Oh, you're just saying that to be kind and because I'm your mother. What's wanted here is a disinterested opinion." (Ha! I thought to myself.) "Captain Vreeland shall tell me the truth." She turned and walked the length of the long room, modeling the gown with unsurpassed elegance, all the while enjoining poor bewitched Captain Vreeland to criticize its every flaw. Having made sure that she looked perfect, there was no chance of that happening. Captain Vreeland had been right all along. The Chengs—not even Elizabeth, herself an adopted Cheng, so to speak—never left anything to chance. Girlish she might well be, but never again would I underestimate my hostess's womanly qualities and strength of character.

Sir Nicholas, meanwhile, had been fuming helplessly, and finally became so frustrated that he even turned to me for solace and succor as his mother and the captain retreated to the sunnier end of the room in order to examine the flaws of the gown in a better light, no doubt.

"I have important matters to discuss with the captain. Can

you not get her out of here, Miss Fennora? She's behaving like a . . . a . . ." He groped for an appropriate word.

"Schoolgirl?" I offered helpfully.

"Yes, by damn, she is. Whatever has got into her? And him!" he blurted, having just noticed that the captain, on bended knee, was gallantly pinning the falling hem of her skirt, something that must have been no easy feat, judging by the stiffness of those new riding boots. The funny part of it was that the captain, as bulky a man as he was, actually looked quite dashing on bended knee. No one could say that Lady Elizabeth was making him play the fool. In fact, it was a scene of great charm, and being charming, was therefore totally lost on stolid, humorless Sir Nicholas.

"Look at them," he moaned. "What's got into them?"

"I shall never tell," I murmured under my breath.

"What?" he asked absently.

"Oh, nothing, Sir Nicholas. Nothing I'd imagine you'd understand."

He had no time to question that remark, for Lady Elizabeth, one arm possessively locked in the captain's, came back across the room, her brow knitted, her aspect that of a scolding mother.

"Nicholas, you can be so remiss at times. Captain Vreeland tells me that he has not yet received his invitation to the ball . . ."

"To the ball?" he sputtered. Clearly, it had never entered his mind. After all, the captain worked for him. Here I bravely interjected myself on behalf of Lady Elizabeth, throwing caution to the winds as regarded ever salvaging my relationship with her son.

"Pray do not blame Sir Nicholas, Lady Elizabeth. I have not yet finished going over the guest list with him, and V is so far down the alphabet, after all. It shall be attended to this very afternoon after tea." Actually, neither she nor I had had aught to do with the guest list, which Sir Nicholas himself had made up and seen to days earlier. I was, however, prepared to use my wits readily, seeing my hostess's design and as determined as she that her captain should attend the ball. There was no way now that Sir Nicholas could get out of sending him an invitation. He still wasn't quite aware of the situation yet, though.

"What are you—?" Sir Nicholas' words were cut off at that point by a sudden sharp pain in his right shin, caused by its coming into rather violent contact with the toe of my patent-

leather boot. He looked at me with a startled, disbelieving expression at first and then glared at me in absolute fury. I had seen him glare so often now that the impact was quite lost upon me. In fact, I think I may even have smiled at him a trifle smugly. It is amazing how much one dares with a man when one's heart is not engaged.

Captain Vreeland was so distracted by his lady love that he had not noticed anything of this exchange. Lady Elizabeth, however, had missed none of it, and in fact gave an involuntary whoop of delight when she saw me kick her son. He might rant and rave and wish to banish me forthwith and forever from Moondragon, but be that as it may, I knew that hell would freeze over before Lady Elizabeth saw me leave after such a brave defense of her scheme.

The chinoiserie clock on the huge black marble mantel struck four deep resonant gongs. "Teatime," Lady Elizabeth cried. "Nicholas, you and Captain Vreeland hurry your business to an end, now. Tea shall be served in the back garden in a quarter of an hour. You will stay, won't you, captain?"

"Well, ma'm, if it won't trouble . . ." he replied with unconvincing reluctance.

"Of course it shan't trouble, shall it, Nicholas?"

Sir Nicholas grudgingly acquiesced, still puzzled and confounded by the events of the past few minutes. Clearly he did not like it when the control of things got out of his own hands. I think he was still wondering when he had lost the reins as Lady Elizabeth and I, contented as two naughty children, bade a brief farewell and left the gentlemen in the parlor.

So hard did we laugh as we mounted the stairs and returned to Lady Elizabeth's rooms that I almost began to fear for the seams of her bodice.

That night, after one of the more disastrous dinners of my stay at Moondragon, my hostess called me into her sitting room for what turned out to be a very long and ultimately fateful talk. From that interesting but seemingly relatively unimportant conversation came much that was to change my life—in fact, all the lives at Moondragon—and lead on to matters of life and death, fortune and misfortune for all of us who lived beneath that great pagoda roof.

My head was bent low, even as my spirits had been bent low by the hidden angers and tensions of the unpleasant meal

from which I had just come. My mood was one of depression, and I wondered only halfheartedly why my hostess, who had left the table early, had summoned me to her rooms. Then, as I paced across the hall, eyes upon the rich blues of the thick Chinese carpet, I saw that each step of mine was matched by the tiny, slippers footfall of another whose stride, smaller than my own, was peculiar and rather tottering, as if the body was too great a weight for the feet that bore it. Nevertheless, the figure at my side kept pace, as, slowly, with a steeling of my inmost resources, I let my eyes glide up the body, from those tiny slippers, past the stiff gold-bordered hem of the robe, up and up past the embroidered flowers and beasts of silver and gold set with lumpy semiprecious stones, past the high, standing collar beneath which I knew lay the matchlessly beautiful, awesomely mysterious Dragon of the Moon, and finally to that ivory face, which came no higher than my shoulder.

It was a face of ineffable beauty and sorrowful majesty. In the depths of those fathomless oriental eyes lay all the pity, wisdom, love, and compassion that one might seek in a lifetime of pain and searching and nameless hungers. It was the face of a woman who had loved and suffered and grown wise beyond not only her earthly years, but perhaps beyond all the years of the earth itself. She embodied ages in her eyes, and all the love and compassion in the world lay in that smile of hers, which was, in truth, not a smile at all, but the merest curving line of her coral velvet lips.

I looked into those eyes and knew that whatever else she was or had been, this young and beautiful creature—witch, ghost, goddess, courtesan, slave—embodied within her all that Woman was and all that she might be. She was at once Theodora and Circe, Penelope and Cleopatra and Isis, Isolde and Nur Mahal, Ishtar and Salome, Athena and Mary of Scots, Brunhild and the Magdalen. The blood lust of Kali was in her veins, and vampirelike, she might drain the throats of living men; yet from her breast would flow the sweet pure milk that nourishes her sons. She had the tenderness of the Mother of God and the vision of the Maid of Orléans. She was demon; she was saint.

All men, looking upon her, would see that which they most wished to see, desire in her what they most wished to desire. All women would know her for themselves, for she was all of us, all our greatness and strength and sorrow—she was Womankind.

Her hand touched mine, and though I felt it not at all upon my skin, she touched my heart, and I mounted those stairs knowing that something was about to happen, something fearful perhaps; but somehow I was not afraid, and I was not alone.

Lady Elizabeth's sitting room was large, and yet it seemed every bit as warm and cozy as she was herself. The furniture she had chosen from the overflowing lumber rooms of Moon-dragon, while all Chinese, was of a lighter, more delicate sort than that in most of the rest of the house, largely unornamented and depending for its beauty more on simple line than ostentatious embellishment. Her color scheme was of old dusty rose ranging from palest to deepest shades, accented occasionally with rich, somber, wintry blues. Against the dark mahogany of her furniture the effect was both striking and tasteful.

The room was empty as I arrived, but the hall door had been left ajar in anticipation of my arrival, and so I entered without ceremony. The evening was chilly, and I instinctively drew toward the crackling little fire that glowed invitingly from the grate. My companion still beside me, I braced one knee against the cushioned fender and leaned my hands toward the warming blaze. She likewise extended her tiny hands, and I could see the delicate, birdlike bones, the tracery of dark veins deep within the glowing translucence of her firelit skin. How warm the fire is, I thought comfortably, and even as I did, a cold chill went through my heart. I knew in an instant that all the warmth of all the fires that would ever blaze upon this earth would never again heat those small tapering ivory fingers of the hands that reached vainly for warmth beside my own. I looked once more toward that lovely face and saw that there was a small moist glimmer within her fathomless eyes. Even then, my Lady of the Dragon was gone. I stood alone before the fire, chilled to my heart's core with sorrow for her—and for all of us.

Just then Lady Elizabeth emerged from her bedroom in a sweeping blue taffeta dressing gown. Suddenly the room was warm and bright again for me, my hands near to scorching from the licking flames, my face tingling with the heat. The curious drain upon my spirits that had come with the appearance of my silent companion gave way to an almost euphoric lightness of heart. I turned, smiling, as my hostess greeted me.

"How can you stay so close to the fire, Deirdre? Look how red your cheeks are. You shall get a fever that way. Come, sit near me, my dear, and hear what I have to say."

"Of course, Lady Elizabeth." She seemed as if she had made up her mind to something. I sensed a certain purposefulness in her manner as I sought a comfortable seat in a chair opposite the sofa where she sat.

"You must be aware, dearest child, of a certain . . . tension in the atmosphere? I . . . I don't know quite where to begin, actually."

"At the beginning would be best, I suppose," I suggested, put in mind of the King's injunction to the White Rabbit in *Alice* to begin at the beginning, go on till the end, and then stop.

"That would be best, as you say, but it is rather a long story. Poor Nicholas is so upset. He has fallen in love with a young lady, the Honorable Miss Paget, you see, and he hopes to marry her."

"Surely that is not a problem," I rejoined dryly. I was really getting fed up with hearing about the Honorable Miss Paget.

"Oh, indeed it is," Lady Elizabeth insisted sincerely. "You see, Miss Paget is the second daughter of the Earl of Wessex, and her style of living is very high. She could not, Nicholas says, be expected to live here at Moondragon."

"Whyever not, if she chooses to marry its master?" I asked, rather taken aback by the expectations of the Honorable Miss Paget.

"That is, she would of course live here part of the year, but she would expect to have an establishment in London, for the season, you know, and a country place in England in order to be near her friends and family."

I was beginning to dislike this English girl, with conviction. "It seems to me that she strikes a hard bargain for her love. Still, what is the problem? Surely someone as smitten as your son appears to be would not stick even at such a price to gain the favors of his light o' love."

"Really, Deirdre, how you talk. 'Light o' love,' indeed," Lady Elizabeth chided lightly, reminding me of the unflattering and coarse meaning that phrase had in its original sense.

"Forgive me, but if a man must pay so dearly for a woman's hand, perhaps that is exactly what she is—a harlot."

"Sometimes you are quite as bad in your language as Owen or my son. Your university background has coarsened

your sensibilities till you are too outspoken. Still, you are really quite right, at that. My mind is not at all easy about Miss Paget, and I long for her arrival in order to see for myself.

"At any rate, Deirdre, the problem is that Nicholas has no money."

"Has no money! But . . ." I broke off, at a total loss for words. It was true that the Chongs lived a relatively simple and reclusive life, but the vast wealth and luxury with which I had been surrounded since my arrival at Moondragon belied my hostess's statement far more eloquently than could my weak words. I merely remained speechless and indicated with a waving hand the gorgeously appointed room in which we sat.

"Oh, Moondragon," she cried, dismissing the whole estate with a wave of her own hand. "Moondragon pays for itself, just barely. It is our invested wealth that is draining away, that has been draining away for nearly thirty years now. Shortly we shall begin, I'm afraid, to cut deeply into the last of our capital."

"One never cuts into one's capital," I breathed sharply, with a touch of smugness, remembering my usually impractical father's wise and oft-repeated advice.

"One never should, but if Nicholas is to establish himself in England in any style, that is exactly what he shall have to do. I'm just sick unto death over it."

"And well you should be. I really cannot understand how he can be so foolish. What can he expect to gain by such a rash act? Capital once expended is nearly never regained."

"He hopes to buy time," Lady Elizabeth explained forlornly.

"Time? Time for what?" I snapped, still irritated by the silliness of the situation.

"Time in which to find the family treasure." She spoke meekly; it did, after all, sound rather farfetched.

"Treasure? You mean like the one in *Treasure Island*?" I asked.

She looked at me blankly for a moment. "Oh, you mean that new book for boys. Well, yes, sort of like that, I suppose. There is a lost treasure in our family, and we don't know where to look for it. It has driven Nicholas mad for years and years—ever since he was a boy, in fact. He has spent many years in China, searched the coastline of Formosa around and around, till he knows it as well as the cliffs of

Bantry Bay itself. He even learned Chinese so that he might read the old Manchu histories of the early days of the dynasty for clues to the whereabouts of the strongholds of his pirate ancestors. It has all been to no avail."

"I must admit that the word 'treasure' does conjure up some very romantic images: gold and jewels, long-lost secret maps, pirate galleons, and the like, but," I added reluctantly, "it also seems like putting all one's hopes on something no more substantial than an opium dream. How realistic is it to try to salvage one's fortunes on the basis of the possibility of finding a long-lost treasure that may never have existed in the first place? Romantic, as I say, but hardly logical or practical." I hated to sound discouraging, but I hated as well to see Lady Elizabeth pinning her hopes for her son on such nonsense. She looked at me as if she were about to disagree, but she got no chance, for there came a sound from the portico, and the doors suddenly came open.

"Why don't you begin at the beginnin', as the little lady suggested five minutes ago, Bess?" Owen Sarsfield-Jones entered the sitting room uninvited, turning to close the portico doors tightly behind him.

"Owen, have you been listening all this time?" his sister asked, showing real annoyance in her tone.

"Sorry, Bess, only havin' a smoke and a glass before a last turn in the garden. Couldn't help hearin'. Still, it wasn't female talk, after all, was it?"

"No, Owen, it wasn't," I conceded. "Do let him stay," I urged. "He's such a charming rogue, after all." He did have the power to make me laugh, and I loved him for it.

"Oh, all right. Come sit by me and be still, Owen." Lady Elizabeth patted a place beside her on the deep rose satin cushions of the sofa. "And now I shall begin at the beginning, as you have both urged, with a brief recital of the Cheng-family history."

I looked inquiringly at Owen, expecting him to jump up in protest as he had at our first dinner together. He caught my meaning at once.

"When she's talkin' about the lost Cheng pirate treasure, I'll listen like a patient lapdog, Miss Deirdre."

"Oh, I see." I nodded gravely and winked with an impish grin of conspiracy.

"Shall I go on now?" Lady Elizabeth sounded a bit impatient.

"Do, Bess," Owen permitted with a flourish. And she did.

"The Manchu dynasty," she began, "which rules China today, began in bloodshed and invasion in the early seventeenth century. By then my husband's family was well established, being descended from Emperor Shen Tsung of the Ming Dynasty through his favorite wife. The last emperor of the Ming dynasty, a cousin of the Chengs of that period, held onto some semblance of power until 1644, when he finally committed suicide as his capital city fell to the invading Manchus. The invaders became all-powerful in China then, but not without more years of struggle against pockets of Ming resistance.

"Among those who still fought against the new dynasty was my husband's grandfather nine generations back. His name was Chen Chih-lung, and he established himself as a pirate in order to harass Manchu shipping. He was ultimately executed at Peking. He left a son, however, who became the greatest pirate of the China Seas, Cheng Ch'engkung, whom the Portuguese traders called Koxinga. For nearly twenty years he ruled the Formosa channel, seizing the port city of Amoy, taking and holding many coastal islands, and attacking Nanking. Finally, after a two-year siege, he took Fort Zelandia, the Dutch fort on the island of Formosa, and the entire island fell into his hands."

"No wonder Captain Vreeland doesn't care for the Chengs," I remarked, more to myself than to the others.

"Koxinga died or was killed sometime in 1662, perhaps during the taking of the fort. Anyway, his son Cheng Chin followed him but did not have the power of his father evidently, for he lost control of the mainland coastal strongholds in China. For nearly twenty more years, however, he ruled Formosa, adding to the great hoard of treasure that his father and grandfather had amassed. He died in 1681 and was succeeded by his son Cheng K'o-shuang."

"He's the laddie who lost it all, isn't he, Bess?" Owen asked with something akin to contempt in his voice. He had been listening with the rapt attention of a fascinated small boy, despite his earlier claims of boredom with the story. It was a far cry from his behavior at the dinner table those few weeks earlier.

"Do be quiet, Owen. Yes, he was forced to surrender Formosa in 1683. Taking a small fleet of followers, his wife, and family, he set sail through the South China Sea toward Malaya. He roved the coastal waters there for a few years,

harassing both Chinese and European shipping until he chanced to pick up some shipwrecked English sailors. They were dropped off on the nearest coast, except for one clever fellow by the name of John Merrick. He spoke Chinese, and like many an eccentric Englishman before and since, he had "gone native," as the saying goes. He ingratiated himself with the older Cheng and ultimately married one of his daughters, but his fast friendship was made with the elder Cheng's son, Cheng Ch'engkung II, who had been named after his great-grandfather, Koxinga.

"In 1687 or thereabouts, when his father died, Ch'engkung, who spoke passable English by now, took the advice of his English friend and brother-in-law and sailed along the coasts of India and Africa and up past Europe toward England. Here fate stepped in, and the history of the Cheng family in Ireland begins."

There was a knocking on the hall door, and Lady Elizabeth's maid, Kathleen, entered, looking surprised to see our little gathering. "Pardon, my lady. I thought that you would be wishing to retire."

"Not just yet, Kathleen. Tonight, it seems, will be a late night for us all. Perhaps, in fact, you had better bring us some sherry and biscuits." The girl nodded and was off on her errand without another word.

"Now, where was I?" Lady Elizabeth asked. "Ah, yes. Fate," she answered herself and, settling deeper into her corner of the sofa, began again to tell her tale.

"It was Cheng Ch'engkung's intention to sail to England, but as he approached Land's End, his little fleet of ships was blown off course by a gale and swept northwestward into the Atlantic toward Ireland. After recovering from the effects of the storm, he and his battered ships were about to set about and sail east when they spotted a French fleet sailing toward Mizen Head. Even though he had been years away from home, John Merrick realized something was afoot. He urged Cheng to follow, which he did, at a distance. The French ships entered Bantry Bay and were attempting an invasion in support, as it turned out, of King James II, who had abdicated and been replaced on the throne by his son-in-law, William of Orange, and Mary, his own daughter. The year was 1689, you see, and William and Mary had just assumed the throne.

"There was an English fleet in the bay under Admiral Arthur Herbert, and by the time the small Cheng fleet arrived,

the battle was engaged. John Merrick, seeing the situation, urged his brother-in-law to take action in support of the English fleet."

"He did, of course," I remarked.

"Oh, yes, indeed. He captured the French flagship, its admiral, and two ships of the line. At the further urging of his brother-in-law, he escorted the ships back to England and landed at Plymouth with all three in tow. King William was ecstatic and insisted that Cheng and his fleet come on to London for an official reception. It must have been quite a sight, I imagine, that little fleet of battered Chinese pirate junks sailing up the Thames to London. When the king and queen heard that the captor of the French admiral was of noble birth, the descendant of an emperor of China, they spared no expense and entertained him and his family lavishly. William made Cheng Ch'engkung and his heirs gentlemen of the kingdom and granted him all the lands we hold today as a reward for his services to the crown."

"What an unusual gesture for William of Orange. He was hardly known for his generosity. And especially to a foreigner!" I remarked.

Lady Elizabeth nodded in agreement. "Yes, it was, but William was a foreigner himself, after all. It must have pleased his sour heart to give lands confiscated from a disloyal Catholic Irishman to a loyal Chinese nobleman. It was at once a slap in the face to the Irish who might support King James, and a warning to them, too. And it established a loyal, grateful, noble, and Protestant house in a crucial spot on the Irish coast. The conversion of Cheng to Christianity was the final clever gesture on John Merrick's part. He suggested it, and Cheng saw the wisdom immediately. It was politic, and so he was baptized into the Church of England before he had been on English soil a fortnight."

"Wasn't he clever, this Cheng Ch'engkung fellow? Just the sort of Johnny I admire." Owen grinned. "Oh, good gel, Kathy, I'll love you for life." He jumped up to snatch the sherry decanter from the tray that Lady Elizabeth's maid had just carried into the room. We all felt the need of a small midnight repast, but Owen as usual was carrying things a bit too far. Kathleen blushed at his idle remark, and I saw at once that he had left his mark upon her susceptible heart. He was a devil of a fellow, I thought, laughing to myself.

The three of us were silent while Owen poured the sherry

and passed it around. Then, nibbling cozily on a biscuit, Lady Elizabeth resumed her story.

"There really isn't much more to tell. In gratitude for being granted lands and a place in the realm, Cheng in his turn presented King William with a pair of Chinese sleeve dogs. They are called Pekingese dogs now. Queen Victoria was supposed to have owned the first one in England, brought over from China for her after the sack of the Summer Palace in Peking in 1860, but this is quite wrong. King William owned the first pair in the West, and they had offspring for many generations. The Pekingese dogs here on the estate are all descended from four others that Cheng kept for himself. Of course, they were and still are very rare and are only to be kept and bred by the emperor of China, but all that changed, first in 1689 and finally in 1860, when others were taken out of China. It was a gift to delight William's heart, of course, for he loved dogs, especially rare ones. Queen Mary was given a five-foot rope of matched pearls."

"Which must have delighted her heart," I breathed, my mouth watering at the very thought of such a gift and how I myself would enjoy it.

"I imagine so," Lady Elizabeth laughingly concurred, shaking her head at my tone of voice. "Anyway, Cheng and his retinue in their exotic finery were a nine-day wonder at court, and then, finally, wise enough not to outstay his welcome, he set sail for Bantry Bay, where he took up residence in an old manor house that once stood in the valley. Within two years he had sailed to China and returned with laborers and had begun work on Moondragon. He spent most of the rest of his life in building the main house and the outbuildings. By the time he died, in 1728, the house and grounds were essentially as they are today. The furnishings have been added to, over the years, and some changes made as times warranted, but Moondragon is more or less exactly as it was at the death of its builder, Cheng Ch'engkung II."

"And the treasure?" I asked lest the whole point of her story be lost in a sudden flurry of idle chatter.

"There was—is—one, and the secret of its whereabouts was passed down from father to son right up until this last generation." Lady Elizabeth shook her head helplessly.

"Then fate stepped in again," Owen remarked soberly, raising his glass to the gods.

Lady Elizabeth smiled sadly at his dramatic gesture and continued. "In 1851 two men knew the secret of the treasure:

my father-in-law, Sir Hannibal Cheng, who was a vigorous man but well into his seventies, and my husband, William. Sir Hannibal was returning from a trading voyage to China in his bark, the *Empress of China*, when she was lost with all hands in a storm in the Indian Ocean. My husband succeeded to the title. In December of that year, one month before Nicholas was born, my husband, William, second Baronet Cheng, died suddenly of typhoid fever. With him died the secret of the whereabouts of the old Cheng pirate treasure upon which the family had always drawn in time of need or in order to finance new ventures, such as the building of Moondragon or the purchase of merchantmen like the *Empress* and the *Pride o' Bantry*.

"The secret died with them in 1851, and all we can do is hope while Nicholas searches. That, in fact, is what he and Captain Vreeland were arguing about this afternoon. Nicholas wants the ship to make one more voyage to China for purposes of trade, and then he plans to sell the *Pride o' Bantry* to an Australian company."

"Sell the *Pride o' Bantry*," I exclaimed in dismay. I had a rather sentimental fondness for the old ship, and thought that it might break the captain's heart to be parted from his ship.

Owen waved a finger at me. "Can't afford to be sentimental about a ship, m'dear. She's out of date now. Built in 1849. She was fast then, but the new thing is steel hulls, screw ships. Sails are a thing of the past. The only thing a clipper's good for these days, don't you know, is the tea run from China to Australia. What Nicholas really needs money for is a brace of fast new steel-hulled merchantmen. Then he'd make money by the potful, what with the inside track that the Cheng family has in the China trade already."

"Owen is right, Deirdre. Captain Vreeland and I have been urging him to follow that course for some time now, but he's so . . . so . . ."

"'Hell-bent' is the word you're gropin' for, m'dear," Owen filled in, waving his glass a bit too lavishly for comfort.

"Maybe so. At any rate, he is so involved in pleasing his Miss Paget and in cutting a swath through London society for her sake that he stands to ruin himself financially unless—"

"Unless he can find a treasure that has been lost for thirty-odd years. That doesn't sound the most practical or the easiest job in the world." I hated to sound so pessimistic, for Lady Elizabeth's sake, but unfortunately, the more I heard of

her son and his exploits, the more reason I had to be pessimistic. He really did seem to be a foolish and impractical man. However, his affairs were no concern of mine, no matter how I sympathized with his mother. I blinked my tired eyes and stifled a yawn behind my hand. The warmth of the fire at my back, combined with the sherry, was beginning to make me drowsy.

Lady Elizabeth was saying something to Owen, who was about to pour himself a third glass. Sleepily I raised my hand to cover another yawn, when something glittering caught my eye through a slat in the louvered doors to the portico. In a second it was gone.

"Owen," I whispered, filled with a sudden sense of dread, "there is someone out there listening at the door."

He looked up at me stupidly for a second; then, light dawning, he leaped into action. He was over the back of the sofa and across the floor at once. He threw open the doors and looked to right and left along the portico, straining his eyes in the moonless darkness beyond the panel of light that shone from the open door. Following him with a candle, I saw that now at least the long front veranda was empty. Disregarding the taper I offered him, Owen raced around the side of the house to my left, his boots clattering on the flagstones.

Lady Elizabeth came up behind me, and the two of us waited tensely, candles in hand, expecting at any moment to hear shouts or the sound of a scuffle as Owen came upon and engaged the mysterious night-stalking eavesdropper. No sound, however, came through the pitchy darkness, save the rush and slap of waves on the rocks at the foot of the cliffs ahead of us. The chilly night air smelled of salt and warm candlewax as we waited for some sign of Owen.

Finally he came warily around the far corner of the building to our right, slowly feeling his way in the dark, testing each of the doors that opened onto the portico. All save Lady Elizabeth's appeared to be locked.

"Nothing?" I asked in a whisper as he came nearer to us.

"Not a sign," he called out. "Must have got down the stairs and out of the garden before I got around the side of the house."

"Whoever could it have been?" Lady Elizabeth asked.

"Don't know," Owen retorted, still trying to catch his breath after his exertions, "but whoever it is likes stories about the Cheng-family treasure as much as we do."

It was with great care that I saw to the locking of my doors and the securing of the portico shutters that night. No glittering eye would look in upon me through half-shut louvers; not if I could help it.

It was ten o 'clock the following morning, and I had just retired to my sitting room to answer a letter from Alexander McNally. It was shameful of me, I knew, but I had written him only one brief note in the three weeks I had been away. Now I sat at my desk once more, confronted with a blank sheet of paper that must perforce be filled. It was an unpleasant prospect, made the more so by my tired, burning eyes and heavy head. I had found it impossible to sleep the previous night. I had tossed and turned, snatching fitful moments of slumber that shattered at the least sound, sending vividly colored fragments of my troubled dreams scattering like the shards of a broken vase through the portals of my consciousness. Try as I would, the pieces would not come together again as I lay awake trying to remember what had so disturbed me in the night. Strange shufflings, what sounded like the scraping of stone on stone somewhere far off, and muffled thumps seemed to float on the chilly night air, and try as I might, I could not overcome the strange sense of foreboding that I had had on and off all evening. Even the romantic thought of lost pirate treasure could not erase the grim terror that lay upon my heart. Something was going to happen.

I had just got as far as writing "My dear Alexander" upon the page when someone knocked on the hall door. Hoping it might be Owen come to save me from my onerous task, I called out a cheerful greeting. The door opened, and a tall, gaunt Chinese manservant entered, bearing a card upon a green jade tray carved in the form of a single perfect lily pad.

I took the card and read:

I shall expect you to accompany the bearer to my library at once.

N. Cheng

The haughty N. Cheng might expect what he wished. While he might be my official host at Moondragon, I was

damned if I would jump for such an imperious command as this. I turned to the servant with a cool smile.

"Inform Sir Nicholas that I am engaged in writing letters at the moment. I shall be with him sometime within the next half-hour."

The servant, grim as death, made no move to leave, though I knew that he had understood me well enough.

"That is all I have to say. You may go and repeat my message to your master. Within the next half-hour." Still he made no move. "Go, I say," I fairly yelled at the poor man. He went.

Nerves suddenly atingle, mind at once clear as a bell, a small smile of triumph upon my face, I began an absolutely witty and inspired letter to dear Professor McNally. He, at least, knew how to treat a lady. Never would that dear, mild, kindly man write such a note to a woman like me. Why, he wouldn't dare.

There came a knocking at the door.

"Enter," I called pleasantly.

Again the silent Chinese manservant, looking ever grimmer and paler under his yellow complexion, presented me with a card upon that infernal lily pad. "AT ONCE" it read in screaming block letters.

"Inform your master"—I smiled coolly—"that I shall be no more than twenty minutes by the clock."

The poor fellow stood dumbly for a moment, and then I thought I saw a knowing glint of admiration leap for a second into his impassive eye.

"You may return to your master." He did, with rather a lighter step, I thought, than he was wont to have. The Chinese, I believe, have ever had a childlike love of fireworks.

Now nearly giddy with the game of it, I returned to my letter, sure that my poor professor was going to be beside himself as he read it, so full of fun and wit and warmth was it. As I continued to write, I became aware of a series of sounds, at first faint, but growing louder by the minute. It was the sound of boots—riding boots—beating a heavy measure upon the stairs, then along the upper hall, and finally to the very door of my sitting room.

There came two thundering blows upon the thick panels of the door. My nerves jangling with the excitement and mischief of the game, I called out a merry "Come in." Still I kept my back to the door, making sure that I presented a

poised and graceful picture as I sat to my labors at the little coromandel writing desk.

The sound that followed made me jump involuntarily, for it was that of a heavy boot being laid to the panels of my door with such force that at a single blow the lock went to pieces and flew in all directions across the room, while splinters of the doorjamb shrieked as they split asunder.

At this I turned, trembling to my depths, my lips twitching slightly as I sought to keep a pleasant smile upon my face. Sir Nicholas played a rough game when his ire was up. I wondered at first if I had not, perhaps, bit off more than I could comfortably chew. One look at him, however, and I knew that I still had the upper hand in this game.

He stood in the shattered doorway, a bevy of awestruck servants cowering in the shadows behind him, jockeying for position among themselves in order to have both a good view of the proceedings and a line of escape should it be needed. He was livid with rage. His eyes blazed like molten onyx; two bloodred spots of color stood upon his high, broad cheeks, contrasting vividly with his tawny complexion. His wide, sturdy body was rigid with fury, and I could see his muscles twitching convulsively even under the tight black-and-buff riding habit that he still wore, though his morning's ride had been nearly two hours earlier.

He stepped stiffly into the room and glared at me. (He seemed to glare at everyone.)

"It wasn't locked, you know. The doorknob would have turned, the door would have opened." I made this remark as sweetly as my quaking voice would allow. Fortunately he was so trembly himself that he didn't notice how shaky I was. He didn't answer me, but instead extended his large, blunt-fingered left hand, which held the jade lily pad. Still there, kept in place by his thumb, which was bloodless from the strength and force of his grip, were the two cards he had sent me. In a low, hoarse voice shaking with fury, he asked, "Did you read these cards, Miss Fennora?"

"Indeed I did, as your manservant will testify, Sir Nicholas." The servant in question ducked out of sight in the hallway.

"And why did you choose to ignore my requests, Miss Fennora?" His voice had an almost deadly calm to it now.

"Oh, but I did not choose to ignore your demands, Sir Nicholas. I answered quite frankly that I was otherwise en-

gaged at the moment and would be with you within the half-hour. Did you not receive my messages?"

"Did you not receive mine?" he fumed, raising his voice to a shout now, and still waving that infernal lily pad toward me, for no particular reason that I could see.

"Don't you feel rather silly," I asked, "a great grown man like you sending little cards on a nonsensical little lily pad? All it wants is a clever little froggy to be the most effeminate bit of claptrap that I've ever laid eyes on. Really, Sir Nicholas, you do surprise me."

By now he was beyond fury, beyond rage, beyond words. He could only dash the little jade tray down upon the floor with all his considerable might. It bounced on the thick carpet and rolled with a decided wobble under a chair, where it lay upside down, perhaps hoping not to be noticed, considering the trouble it had caused. The cards fluttered soundlessly to the rug at his feet.

"Oh, your poor little lily pad," I cried in mock sympathy.

"My lily pad be damned," he shouted. "Will you come to the library, woman, or do I have to drag you?"

By way of answer I turned, signed my letter with a flourish, and after carefully sealing it, turned back to Sir Nicholas, who still stood near the doorway surrounded by debris—the bits of lock, the splinters of the doorjamb, and his two offending cards.

"My letter is finished in exactly the half-hour that I expected it would take, and is ready to be posted. Now, happily, I shall join you in the library. I don't believe I have ever seen that room, you know. Will you show it to me now, Sir Nicholas?" I took his arm possessively, and, all smiles, accompanied him out the shattered doorway and into the crowded hall.

A dozen curious, rather relieved servants gave way to us as we walked, still arm in arm, toward the head of the stairs. I don't know quite what they had expected to see, but perhaps visions of my head upon a jade lily pad had entered their minds. At any rate, they seemed now to regard me with open admiration. I rather felt that I deserved it.

Passing his manservant in the corridor, Sir Nicholas made a *sotto voce* growl. "Fix that damned door, will you!"

We went down the stairs together rather regally. After much preliminary, I was about to find out why I had been summoned to Sir Nicholas' library in the first place.

The Opium-Eater

Thou hast the keys of Paradise, oh just
subtle and mighty opium!

—Thomas De Quincey

The huge carved mahogany doors of the great library of Moondragon were invariably kept locked by Sir Nicholas, and so, having received no prior invitation from him, I had not, as I have said, seen the room. Now, entering upon his arm, I was totally overwhelmed. It was too splendid for words. I did not, however, have time to gain more than a fleeting impression of the room before Sir Nicholas shook my hand from his arm in a peremptory gesture that bespoke both his fury and his disdain. He slammed the doors behind us and dared to lock them, a move I chose to ignore, noting with some comfort that the key, a large brass one, remained in the lock, and confident that, should it come to blows, I was lighter and quicker on my feet than my stolid opponent. I knew well enough not to impute either romantic ardor to his catalog of feelings for me or to his motive in locking us in the library together. This interview, whatever its purpose, was to be strictly business, and he would obviously brook no interruptions, especially from his mother, whom Kathleen must by now have informed of my scene with her son.

The library, though on the eastern side of the house, had very little light streaming through its windows, despite the early hour of the day. Hence, like the rest of the ground-floor rooms with their high, deeply recessed windows, this one was lit by a profusion of tall white tapers, which gave the room a warm waxy scent that mingled not at all unpleasantly with the slightly musty smells of old leather, paper, and dust that

came from the thousands and thousands of old books that lined the walls. A small bronze incense burner in the form of a stylized lion standing upon an immense pedestal desk at the far side of the room sent curls of musky gray smoke into the air, adding still another scent to those already mingling in the close atmosphere. It added a touch of the dramatic and exotic that suited the character of Sir Nicholas Cheng. It would have made Jane Austen laugh with delight, even as I did myself.

Sir Nicholas glared at me from the tremendous granite fireplace against which he had taken up an imposing and rather studied stance. His black eyes, so often as soft and as fathomless as those of my Lady of the Dragon when in repose, were now keen and at the alert. He was studying me with a shrewdness that I at first thought was meant to unsettle me. I was damned if it would. Then I realized he was still in a fury from the scene in my sitting room and was endeavoring to master himself.

I decided to give him every opportunity to do so, since I was, while rather pleasantly stimulated myself, still not desirous of either continuing in our former argumentative vein or provoking a new quarrel with him. Instead, I turned away to the right, to the opposite wall of the long, wide room that ran from the front wall of the house (where I now stood) all the way to the back, or north, wall, where Sir Nicholas still remained, regarding me inscrutably from before the cavernous fireplace. The entire wall was lined with enclosed mahogany bookcases from floor to beamed ceiling, save where the high wide windows broke their ranks. Behind the glass doors I could see row upon row of leatherbound books, mostly in Latin and Greek. It was a collection that even my father might have envied, and I could not help feeling a bit piqued that such a man as Nicholas Cheng, probably unappreciative of this vast store of knowledge and research material, owned a library that many a struggling scholar would give his very soul to possess. Behind me, on the west wall, was a further expanse of bookcases, fully forty feet in length and fifteen in height, broken only by the ten-foot-high doors through which we had entered. These cases contained hundreds of bound manuscripts in Chinese, and even more hundreds of scrolls in the same language. Interspersed among the piles of scrolls on the shelves were bits of very ancient pottery and a profusion of green bronze sculptures and vessels, which I realized must be examples of prehistoric Chinese art.

A sound, the opening of a cabinet door, attracted my attention, and I turned once more to the north end of the room. Sir Nicholas was standing at the open central doors of a tall, wide desk or chest—I could not quite tell which, at first—that seemed to have perhaps twenty or so tiny doors or drawers surrounding the larger pair. From this cabinet he had taken a small lacquer tray, which rested now upon the sliding desktop before him. He opened a tiny door at the very top of the cabinet, slid out a long red lacquer box, and withdrew from it a bundle of what appeared to be ebony sticks inlaid with scales of silver. Replacing the red box with what almost amounted to ceremony, he began to fit the bundle of "sticks" together until he had fashioned from them a long, slender pipe in the form of an evil-looking viper, its tail a green jade mouthpiece, its head, also of green jade, containing gleaming ruby eyes. Surmounting its head like a crown was a tiny brass bowl. A strange-looking pipe, that, and vaguely suspicious.

He placed the pipe upon the tray, and from still another cubbyhole produced a small bronze lamp with a handle in the form of a coiling dragon. This lamp he lit, again almost ceremoniously. A blue flame sprang to life. Now, from another door in the cabinet he removed a small green jade box and a tiny ebony-handled silver spatula. Suddenly his fingers trembled slightly, and I saw a certain feverish look come into his eyes. His jaw was set, the muscles at the sides of his face and at his temples working convulsively as he opened the jade box and withdrew by means of the spatula a globule of some dark, resinous substance that came away leaving a long stringy rope trailing like a tail. Deftly he spun the spatula till the tail had become a part of the globule. Now, slowly, with great care, he warmed the little bead of resin in the blue flame of the exotic bronze lamp. Even twenty feet away I could smell the sickly, medicinal odor that arose, pungent enough to cut through the mingled scents already in the room. The globule on the end of the spatula burned blue-green and shrank to the merest drop, at which point Sir Nicholas, after heating the bowl of the pipe itself for a second in the flame, spun the burned residue of the resin deftly into the pipe. Pausing only to blow out the flame of the little bronze lamp, he placed one broad hand upon the granite overmantel of the fireplace at his side and took a long pull upon that curious pipe. In seconds his eyes had lost their keen edge and his quaking hands were still.

"Have you never seen chandu before?" he asked.

"I confess I have not, Sir Nicholas, though I have read my De Quincey, naturally."

"You are cool, Miss Fennora. You surprise me."

"And you, Sir Nicholas, surprise me not at all."

"I believe I detect a note of disapproval in your tone," he challenged, though by now he seemed mellow and not at all aggressive.

"I find far graver flaws in your character to disapprove of, were I so inclined, Sir Nicholas, than the mere display of a childish penchant for opium-eating."

"Childish?" he asked mildly.

"Come, sir, grown men with stout hearts and strong minds have much better things to do with their brains and bodies in the pitifully short span allotted to them on earth than to deliberately besot themselves with hashish. Upon my soul, you are even more like Owen than I would ever have guessed."

"Like Owen?" This almost shook him out of his drifting state enough to make him angry.

"Naturally. While the least upset sends him off to raid the sherry and lay waste the port, a petty tiff with a woman that you don't even care a pin's fee for sends you into a pipe dream. That makes no odds, sir, as every good Irish tout well knows." I thought best to change the subject at this point, and so walked across to the broad desk and gazed up at the full-length portrait that hung upon the wall behind it. "So that's Hannibal Cheng," I remarked, looking into the fierce, brooding face that glared down from the canvas above me. I would almost wager, I thought, that Sir Nicholas had practiced long hours before that portrait in order to perfect his own haughty expression. This was decidedly unfair of me, for while it was undoubtedly true that he looked uncannily like his late grandfather, if anything, Sir Nicholas' eyes were even more magnetic and intelligent, a characteristic perhaps inherited from his Welsh-Irish mother, whose own eyes were her best feature. In coloring, stance, set of countenance, and build, however, he was so much like this portrait of Hannibal Cheng that they should have been father and son. All these similarities were at once apparent, despite the fact that the portrait of Sir Hannibal, which appeared to have been painted sometime in the 1820's, showed him as a man who must have been in his fifties at the time.

He had the appearance, what with his thick black hair powdered forward in the rather affected "windswept" style of the period, of an aging Chinese version of the typical Regency

rakehell. He wore his mustache abristle and his sideburns curved artfully. His black-and-buff riding habit, much like Sir Nicholas' own, was so tight upon his broad muscular body, and his neck cloth so high around his throat, that he might well have been strangling for want of air. In his hand was a riding crop held in a manner that suggested the flogging of men, not horses. Off in the distance at his right was the bell pagoda of Moondragon park. To the left loomed Moondragon itself, with the guardian lions looking out blindly toward Bantry Bay. At his booted feet lay a book open to a page upon which was written a bit of verse. A playful Pekingese dog chewed in delight upon a corner of the volume. It was a fanciful, almost silly touch in what was otherwise a compelling portrait of a powerful and commanding man.

"He does look a Regency buck, don't he?" Sir Nicholas asked reflectively.

"That he does," I agreed.

"He was a great friend of the Duke of Cumberland and his brother, the Prince of Wales."

"Was he?" I asked, suddenly more interested. Those were two very august personages indeed, though their reputations were certainly vile.

"Helped the Prince of Wales with Brighton Pavilion, in fact."

"He did?" I asked, rather taken aback. Having seen the pavilion, I was not sure I would have wished to make the boast that anyone of my blood had had aught to do with it, save perhaps than to aid in its swift destruction.

"Yes. Seems he gave the prince some Chinese wallpaper as a gift. The old boy rather liked it and got the idea that the whole interior should be Chinese. I really think that Grandpapa got a certain perverse pleasure out of seeing a royal prince and future king of England making an ass of himself. According to his diaries, he and Ernest Cumberland, who was a right ready bastard if ever there was one, had many a good laugh over that monstrosity. They felt that they had really gulled the prince into making a white elephant of the place."

"Well, it certainly is that," I agreed.

"Oh, his diaries are a pleasure to read. The things those old villains did are damn near unprintable, but devilish funny. Those must have been great days," he added with a touch of envy in his dreamy, drug-softened voice.

"I'm sure," I agreed dryly, thinking of the lack of proper privies, the childbed fever that in those days could even claim

the life of a royal princess and heiress presumptive to the throne, and the typhoid epidemics, silently saying a prayer of thanks for indoor plumbing, the advances of Dr. Lister, and the introduction of chloroform into surgery. So much for the Regency period.

"Have you never thought of publishing his diaries? Edited carefully, of course," I amended my question prudently.

"I've thought of it. Maybe I will, someday. Haven't the time now," he mumbled laconically from a long, comfortably upholstered divan in a corner beyond the fireplace. He was sprawled like a prince out of one of Richard Burton's *Arabian Nights* tales. They smoked their pipe dreams through the sinuous coiling tubes of a hookah, but the effect was much the same.

A strange sense of unreality overcame me just then as I leaned against the big, cluttered, book-piled mahogany desk, with its bronze lion spewing exotic fumes, and regarded my drug-soaked host across the room. Who would have dreamed that I, Deirdre Fennora, priggish, proper Irish spinster of modest means and rather intellectual pretensions, should find myself, but two months an orphan, locked in the solitary company of a bizarre and haunted palace in the solitary company of a half-Chinese opium-eating baronet? What was even stranger was that it didn't seem to phase me a bit! Surely the smoke from Sir Nicholas' pipe wasn't affecting my clever brain! I laughed out loud at my silly concept, thus rousing my host from a drowse.

"That's my father over there," he drawled, nodding toward a portrait farther down the same wall toward the dark north end of the room.

I moved toward it, nearly knocking over one of several rolls of Chinese scrolls that had been stacked haphazardly against the desk and a nearby chair.

"You certainly are careless. These scrolls are probably priceless, and here you let them lie."

"I've been doing research. No time for formalities. It will all be put right before the ball."

"No doubt." I looked up at the portrait of William, second Baronet Cheng, and was amazed. "Why, he's nothing like you at all," I could not help but exclaim, even though it was perhaps imprudent and even a little rude.

"Odd, ain't it?"

"Not really. He's nothing like his father, either, after all. Except around the eyes and nose a bit. He looks more . . .

more oriental than either of you—a purer strain of Chinese, with less of the massiveness of occidental bone structure."

"He was a purer strain. My grandfather, Sir Hannibal, was half-Irish. My grandmother was his first cousin, and she was only one-quarter Irish. The rest was Chinese blood, so the strain was indeed strong in my father."

"He was a fine-looking man. Very sensitive-looking," I remarked, studying the portrait before me.

William Cheng had indeed been a handsome man, although of an altogether different type than either his father or son. His face was long and oval and softer than theirs, which were heavier and bonier. His cheekbones, while high and wide like theirs, were clothed with more flesh; his eyes were completely oriental in cast, soft and almond-shaped, with a gentle aspect of kindness rather than command. His hair was jet black, straight, and worn short in a style that suggested convenience rather than fashion. His build was slender and graceful, his hands small, with short, tapering fingers, devoid, unlike those of either his father or son, of any rings. He must, I imagined, by the proportions of his figure in its surroundings, have been not much taller than I, nor, in fact, much larger. I could picture him with Lady Elizabeth quite readily, the two of them—small, light, delicate, and handsome creatures—each a perfect complement to the other.

In the portrait he wore the simple, unadorned uniform of a sea captain, the dark blue and gold complementing, even accentuating, the yellow caste of his skin. Behind his right shoulder were the gently swaying palms of the valley behind Moondragon. Off on his left, a section of cliff with a tall clipper ship at anchor in the bay beyond. At his feet, no Pekinese cavorted, no book lay open. Only peonies grew. That in itself posed a question as to his nature; the austere costume and almost ascetic severity of his grooming, the stark cliffs and anchored ship, somehow did not go hand in hand with the delicate lush flowers at his feet or even with the romantic image of swaying palms that somehow, at least to me, conjured images of subtropical lands beyond the seas. Just as the oddly playful dog seemed out of character with the force of Hannibal Cheng's personality, so the delicate peonies and palms were out of place somehow with the blue-garbed severity of William Cheng.

"Your mother and father must have made a fine-looking couple."

"I suppose so," he remarked offhandedly. "My grandfather couldn't stand him, you know."

"Whyever not, Sir Nicholas?" Actually, I could imagine a variety of reasons why a man like Hannibal Cheng could very possibly dislike his own son.

"He thought he was weak. Had no respect for him. Arranged my parents' marriage. Thought it might help straighten him out."

"A wife often does that for a young man. Gives him a sort of direction and purpose in life," I rejoined helpfully.

"He wasn't young at all. He was in his forties when he married and died. Had spent his youth in China studying the arts—poetry and the like." Here his voice filled with contempt. "Only liked sailing so he could get away from here and go out there and live like a bloody Chinese." Bitterness toward the image he had of his father seethed in his voice.

"Was that so terrible? After all, China is as much or more a part of the Cheng heritage as Ireland even after all these generations. It was in his blood—as it is in yours."

"I'm an Irishman. My sons will be Irishmen. In fact, they will have English blood in their veins, the blood of old nobility."

"I was already aware that your sons will have the blood of old nobility in their veins. The blood of your brave, noble, royal Chinese ancestors! Lord deliver me from people who cannot accept what they are, but who must run away and find ways to hide from what they are."

Fortunately he chose to ignore my remarks, and went on pursuing his own train of thought. "If he'd lived, he'd have left my mother eventually. He loved her, in his way, of course, but it was against his nature to stay here with her at Moondragon, to stay with any woman, maybe. It was against everything he really wanted. It's best, I suppose, that he died."

"That's a terrible thing to say."

"It is, isn't it? Well, there's no help for it. He was dead before my mother stopped loving him. That, at least, is a blessing."

"Oh, for whom? If she had known the truth as you seem to know it, she might have been able to forget his memory long ago and be happily married again to a man who could love her as she deserves to be loved." His typical masculine presumptuousness irritated me no end.

"My mother remarry! She would never have done such a thing!" Clearly I had touched a sore spot.

"Would she not? Many a woman has, you know. Not every woman dons the weeds like the Widow of Windsor and pines for a dead husband. In fact, even Victoria had her John Brown," I added a little maliciously.

"What kind of a woman, I ask you?" he challenged, a little irrelevantly and with great righteousness.

"Well, certainly not one fit to be the mother of a Cheng, I will admit." I murmured this last dryly—and to myself, I thought.

"I heard that," he shouted sharply. His voice surprised me, for he had seemed to be in a hazy, languid stupor for some time now. In a second, with the grace of a rather large cat, he had bolted from the couch and was at my side, his broad, muscular body very close beside my own. His eyes were seething with anger, even hatred, as he gazed up at the portrait of his long-dead father, whom he never knew.

"He was a sly, effeminate dabbler and had no business getting a son off any woman."

"That is quite a judgment to be made by a son who was not even born till a month after the death of his father. Upon what basis is that judgment made?"

"Hannibal Cheng's diaries and Mrs. Ling, who knew him well."

"And you trust them both implicitly, I am sure. With much reason, too. No father ever had an ax to grind with his own son." My sarcasm was lost upon him. He made a bitter mow at the portrait of his father, and turned to me, a certain surliness in his manner.

"Get over there and sit down." He nodded to a chair facing his desk.

I didn't argue, not knowing how the opium might have affected him. I need not have worried, however, for I saw almost at once that his anger had been directed solely at the portrait. In fact, upon closer observation, I could see that he was quite himself again, the effects of the drug having worn off or perhaps not having been very great to begin with. I began, in fact, to suspect him of a bit of dramatic shamming. He strode over to the desk, standing with careless poise beneath the portrait of Hannibal Cheng.

"Now, he was a man!" He slammed his fist down on the desk in order to emphasize his statement. "When Hannibal Cheng said 'Jump,' people jumped."

"Always the mark of a great man," I concurred mildly.

"Your snideness is not lost upon me, lady."

"I hope not. It would indicate a certain dullness of wit."

"Bitch." He muttered this to himself, and since I half-agreed with him, I remained silent.

"Who was it that you saw on the portico last night?"

The sudden change of tone and subject took me aback. I looked up at him, startled.

"Who was on the portico?" he reiterated.

"I don't know. I only saw a glimmer through the louvers; the glimmer of an eye, I realized at once. It was only a matter of seconds before Owen was after him, but whoever it was had already gone. Owen assumed that it was an eavesdropper interested in our conversation."

"My mother was telling you about the treasure?"

"Yes."

"She had no business doing that, you know."

"I am her friend. She confided in me because she is worried about you. I think she needed to talk to someone sympathetic to her. Women do that, you know."

"And you are sympathetic?"

"To your mother, yes. To you, no. You are a very foolish man. One hardly wrecks the basis of one's fortunes for love, with only the slender hope of recouping by means of a supposed 'pirate treasure.' It is, as I say, a foolish and, most likely, vain gamble. You stand to lose everything you possess by that course—including the lady you are trying to win. In fact, she'd probably be the first to go, at the merest glimpse of the initial pinched penny."

"You don't even know her. How dare you say such things?" He was angry again now, glaring as usual. His elder incarnation glared in like manner from the gold frame behind him. I was not in the mood to be glared at by the grandson as well as the grandfather, and so I bit my tongue and tried to pacify him.

"You are quite right, Sir Nicholas. I do not know the lady and have not the slightest right to speak so. Pray forgive my sharp tongue. I assume that, having answered your question in regard to the eavesdropper, the conversation is now at an end." I rose and walked toward the door. He still leaned against the desk, his hands splayed out upon its cluttered, book-strewn surface, watching me with a look of frustrated anger. Clearly he wanted to continue our fight and work himself into another tirade. I would not abet him this time.

At the door I paused, turning the big brass key in the lock and removing it surreptitiously behind the cover of my skirt. "Until luncheon, Sir Nicholas. Good luck finding your treasure." Here I gave a derisive laugh and withdrew. Once out in the hall, I paused again only long enough to insert the key in the outer side of the library door and turn it gently in the lock. Since Sir Nicholas enjoyed locked doors so much, I was sure he'd love this one.

Grinning wickedly to myself, I mounted the stairs and walked back to my sitting room. Mrs. Ling and Shi Fu, Sir Nicholas' manservant, were overseeing the repair of my door by two small, wiry Chinese carpenters. I greeted them with cool dignity, and then, with an impish gleam in my eye, suggested to Shi Fu that he would be well advised to look in upon his master in about five minutes' time.

He studied my face with passivity for a moment and then withdrew, walking with an uncharacteristically quick step toward the stairs. A sudden pounding upon the library doors below caused him to fairly fly down into the main hall.

Mrs. Ling nodded to me, a slight smile of tribute playing on her serene and passive lips. I nodded in return and slipped past the carpenters into my room. It had been quite a morning.

Owen was out on the portico looking down over the balustrade with some degree of concentration. He didn't even hear me as I came out and joined him.

"What is so fascinating down there?" I asked, leaning far over and following the direction of his gaze almost straight down.

He looked up quickly and grinned. "Hello, didn't hear you come out. Been down with Nicholas, I understand? Had quite a row, you two."

"Row? Why, no, not at all," I answered innocently. "I didn't raise my voice once."

"You may not have, but he did, I'll wager. Kicked in your door, too. You ought to watch him, Deirdre. He can be a very nasty customer when his Irish is up, as they say. Why, I imagine he's not above hittin' a lady."

"Oh, and are you?" I smiled.

"Am I what?" he asked guilelessly.

"Above hitting a lady?"

"A lady, yes. A doxy, no. Women in general, though, need a good cuffin' once in a while. Keeps 'em in line, don't ya

know." Here he pursed his lips in amusement. I knew he didn't wish me to take him seriously, but I did, nevertheless. I doubted a man like Owen was strong enough to take on a strong woman of sensibility, but he probably played havoc among the weak, devoted servant girls that he had his way with of a night.

"What do you think would happen to a man that 'cuffed' me?" I asked quietly.

Here he roared appreciatively, taking the question as a good joke. "Why, he'd have a perishin' war on his hands, the poor fool."

We both laughed at this. He took my arm, and we started to stroll around the portico toward the stairs to the garden, passing the open doors to my bedroom, the shuttered doors to the next guest suites, and finally the open doors to Sir Nicholas' huge apartments on the western, or seaward, end of the house. Rounding the corner, Owen let go my arm and stopped. "I found something dark and soft-looking from the flagstone floor. It looked rather like a dead mouse."

"What do you got there?" I asked curiously.

"Not sure. What does it look like to you?" He held out the mouse-gray lump on the palm of his hand.

"It's a clump of very dusty cobweb. At first I thought it was a mouse."

"So did I. Where would somethin' like this come from? Nicholas has had this house cleaned so spotless that there's not a spider left, let alone a web. And as for dust, he's banished that for the next fortnight at least, lest a mote light upon Miss Paget."

"Are you thinking that it was carried here from somewhere else by our eavesdropper last night?"

Owen removed a silk square from his breast pocket and carefully wrapped the bit of cobweb in it. "Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin would consider this a clue, would he not?"

"That he would," I concurred heartily.

"Well, I guess it will be safe here." He replaced the silk square in his pocket and patted his breast lightly. "I may get to the bottom of this yet."

"Of course you shall! May I help, Monsieur Dupin?"

"*Ma chère amie*, but of course," he replied with a Gallic shrug of the shoulders.

We laughed and continued on arm in arm down to the garden, where we strolled about aimlessly for a time, neither of us feeling the need to speak, but each of us wrapped up in

our own thoughts. By his frequent sighs and the internal conversation he seemed to be holding with himself, I could tell that Owen had gotten the matter of the eavesdropper off his mind and had some more personal thoughts upon his mind. I had had an idea for some time that I was being courted. Now he seemed to be on the brink of speaking.

"You are unlike yourself, all of a sudden, Owen."

"Am I? I am sorry. Shall I be more cheerful, perhaps?"

"You needn't sham, you know," I replied, rather more tenderly than I had expected of myself. Surely I could not have any but the most superficial feelings for this wine-bibbing rascal!

"I was wishing that I had something to do with my life. It's all very well swilling sherry and rolling the local lasses—forgive me, Deirdre, but that's how I spend my nights, after all."

"I am well aware," I answered, remembering the sounds of Owen Sarsfield-Jones humming bawdy love songs under his breath as he passed my bedroom on many a night. "Why do you not rejoin your regiment or whatever it is you army gentlemen do?"

"Can't," he mumbled.

"Why not?"

"Cashiered!" he replied.

"Cashiered? What on earth for?"

"Cheating at cards."

"And did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Cheat at cards."

"Yes, of course. Does that shock you?"

I hugged his arm and laughed. "No." I shook my head. "No, Owen, oddly enough, it doesn't."

He laughed, his youthful bright eyes aglow, and twirled me about in a dance step. Suddenly we were waltzing down the flagstone avenue between the garden beds. He was quite good company when he wasn't drinking, and of late he had not been drinking as much as usual. I flattered myself that I had something to do with it.

"Tell me, Deirdre," he asked, once he had collapsed, still laughing, on a bench at the end of the garden, "are you left well fixed by your father?"

I had expected this. "Why, yes, Owen, I am. Comfortable, at least. I shall never want for the comforts of life."

"Or the little luxuries one gets so accustomed to?" he asked with a guileless charm.

"No, nor the little luxuries, either. Father was very prudent."

"Lucky you," he murmured. "My father, the old bastard, lost it all and left me to fend."

"And you couldn't, poor baby," I sympathized.

"No," he mourned ruefully.

Ah, Owen, I thought. What a charming rogue you are. Rather like a big spoiled baby. You like me well enough, it's true, but you are wooing me for my money, and oddly enough, I'm rather enjoying it. Well, and why not? You are an engaging rogue, you're fourteen years younger than Alexander McNally and a good deal handsomer, with your long, slender, graceful build and bright blue eyes. I looked at him sitting beside me on the bench. He was feeling so sorry for himself that it almost made me laugh out loud.

He is going to ask me to marry him any minute. What would it be like? I wondered. Fun at first! I'd open the house in Dublin. There would be parties and dinners and the theater. He'd like that quite well. But then boredom would set in again, and he'd begin to drink too much and womanize. Of course, he'd still be mine. I'd probably have a child, which would be nice, and of course, everyone would pity me, for it would become obvious that he had married me only for my money.

Owen took my hand in his and kissed it. Very quietly, almost sadly, he asked, "Deirdre, will you marry me?"

"No, Owen, my dear," I whispered tenderly.

"What?" He looked at me sharply.

"I said, 'No, thank you,' Owen."

"Oh! That's what I thought you said."

"Owen?"

"Yes?"

"Don't be sad, Owen. You wouldn't have been happy anyway. You see, my money is all in an unbreakable trust."

"Oh! I see! Thank you for telling me."

"You are quite welcome."

Slowly we rose and walked arm in arm back up the garden path toward Moondragon.

And like the red Indians in America, another proposal "bit the dust."

There was nothing of sadness in Owen's countenance at luncheon, and so it was with some relief that I could assume he had taken my rejection of his suit in stride. The only out-

ward sign of what may have been his inward thoughts were a knitted brow, a faraway look in the eyes, and the fact, unusual for him, that he was neither voluble nor bibulous. These manifestations meant little, I assured myself hopefully. After all, he was not a very deep man; he would not suffer the kind of pangs a man like Alexander MacNally would suffer at such a rejection. His was a weak character, and his affections, therefore, ran less deep—or so I thought, perhaps a bit too smugly.

Lady Elizabeth did not speak of my morning contretemps with her son over luncheon, but I could tell that she was eager to hear the details, having heard but a sketchy outline from Kathleen upon her arrival back at Moondragon after a ride into Glencannis village. Deeming it improper to discuss such a matter over luncheon, when servants might overhear us, and despite the fact that Sir Nicholas himself presented no deterrent to our speaking freely, he having absented himself from the meal entirely, Lady Elizabeth practiced her usual almost inhuman forbearance and waited until we might chat in the privacy of her sitting room. Owen, minus his usual St. Boniface's cup, joined us, still lost in his brown study and most of the time more or less oblivious of our discussion.

However, I told the story of my confrontation with Sir Nicholas with great vigor and no little humor, thus eliciting several hearty guffaws from him, even in spite of his general abstraction. Lady Elizabeth, on the other hand, though greatly absorbed by my description of the morning's events, was mortified, not so much at Sir Nicholas' behavior—which was, after all, typical—but rather at mine, which she deemed unladylike.

"Really, Deirdre, you are too bold entirely! Your behavior was quite calculated to bait him. Is not Nicholas strong-willed and violent enough without you goading him to further displays of his tyrannous nature? It is too hard having such a son, though I dearly love him. Must my dear friend's child, one who is becoming nearly a daughter to me, deliberately bring out the very worst in him? Even Owen would never dare rouse Nicholas so!"

At this point Owen slapped his long, rather overslender thigh and laughed delightedly.

"My hat's off to ya, Deirdre, my love. Bess's quite right, ya know. I'd never dare rouse him so, knowin' full well 'pon what side ma bread is buttered, don't ya know? But that don't

stop me cheerin' ya lustily, lass, for you won in that little set-to, Deirdre love. You won, and in this house nobody ever wins but Nicholás."

"Owen, how you talk! He is your very own nephew, and you talk so! It is too disloyal of you!"

"Bess, if you'd ever let me or his governor lay a rod to his bare backside when he first started his temper tantrums, he'd be a better man for it today. He's had his own way in this world since the day he was born, and you've only yourself to blame now if you don't like his behavior."

Lady Elizabeth made no answer, but clucked her tongue and sulked. I myself was inclined to agree with Owen's appraisal, though it was not my place to comment. Moreover, since Owen was himself a spoiled, overindulged younger son who had never learned to manage a useful life of his own, I felt I could hardly encourage him in too vociferous a criticism of his nephew. Sir Nicholas, after all, in spite of his violent temper and autocratic nature, seemed to have a useful brain and an active life.

Perhaps, I thought, the key to the characters of both men lay somewhat in Lady Elizabeth's own easy, indulgent nature. It had not taken me long to discover that despite her impulsive and vivacious girlishness, she had a strong will and great personal discipline. Unfortunately, she had very little "bark" and almost no "bite" whatsoever when it came to others. Her servants obeyed her out of sheer love of her happy nature. With her family it was a different matter. However often she might command Owen or chide us all, it had little effect. Owen breezily ignored her commands and went his own dissolute merry way, and one soon got used to her chiding and realized that she could never back up her words. She was far too softhearted for her own good, and certainly had been so for the good of Owen, who had been with her at Moon-dragon more or less steadily from his fourteenth or fifteenth year, or for Sir Nicholas, whose high-strung, autocratic temperament should have been tamed from his earliest infancy.

Still, one could hardly blame her. Like the light, trim sailing craft that she was, Lady Elizabeth had needed a strong hand at her own helm. Instead, it had been her lot in life to steer the course alone, not only for herself but also for two heavier ships of the line. Who could blame her if they had disobeyed her signals and gone off on more erratic courses of their own? At least they were still a part of her fleet, so to speak, and that in itself was something.

But now I thought it politic to change the subject, since Lady Elizabeth was clearly hurt by Owen's remarks about Sir Nicholas, and Owen himself was in no mood to be sparing of her feelings. Instead, I turned the conversation to how very much I was enjoying my stay. From thence it was only a small leap to the visit my parents had made to Moondragon. This was a subject which interested me greatly, since anything that touched upon the subject of my long-dead mother was dear to my heart.

"Your mother adored Moondragon," Lady Elizabeth smiled sentimentally. "It appealed to her sense of romance, even as it always has to mine. You may not remember, Deirdre, but your mother was a dreamer with a great longing—never fulfilled, unfortunately—for travel and adventure. Moondragon was so exotic that she used to say she felt as if she had been to China just having been here those few short weeks. She hated to leave, I know."

"Your father didn't much like havin' to insist that they leave early. He spent all his time in the library goin' over all them perishin' Greek and Latin tomes that Hannibal Cheng's Irish grandfather, Valerian Wallace, left to him," Owen drawled carelessly.

"You philistine," I retorted. "Those manuscripts are priceless. Of course my father would have spent all his time among them. But no matter now! Why did he insist they leave early?"

"Your father would not have your dear mother stay a moment longer than necessary, once he learned she was having a series of frightful nightmares. He was afraid—"

"Nightmares," I exclaimed.

"Why, I'd forgotten all about that, Bess," Owen interjected.

"Oh, do be quiet, Owen! What nightmares, Lady Elizabeth?" I asked, strange mixed feelings of foreboding and excitement suddenly warring within me. I almost knew what was coming next; I dreaded it, and yet I had to know.

"I suppose it must have had something to do with her condition at the time. None of us knew, of course, but . . . Owen, I do wish you were not here! It is not proper to speak of such things before you. It is quite bad enough to speak so to Deirdre, who is unmarried, but with you here it is quite impossible." Lady Elizabeth looked vexed and fretful. I, I am sure, looked dismayed. Whatever she had to say might be very important to me, and here she was going on about proprieties, which bothered me not at all under the circum-

stances. I made a mute appeal for help to Owen with my eyes, and he came, rather ungracefully but nevertheless gallantly, to my rescue by jumping into the fray himself.

"What Bess is tryin' to say without sayin' it in so many words is that your mother was with child at the time—carryin' you, in fact."

"Really, Owen, how you talk!" his sister fretted.

I might have agreed with Lady Elizabeth's protest under other circumstances, but despite the blush that I felt creep up my neck and across my cheekbones, I pursued the rather indelicate subject, regardless of what had been my mother's condition at the time.

"Do you mean to say . . . ?" I began. "How long were my parents here? When did they leave? And what of these nightmares?"

Lady Elizabeth answered my questions readily, hoping, no doubt, to steer Owen off the subject. "They arrived in the third week of September, planning to stay through the end of November in order to be here for some hunting. They left abruptly at the end of the first week of November because your mother had been having a series of nightmares that were disturbing both her sleep and her nerves."

"She saw the ghost, too, I think, didn't she?" Owen asked matter-of-factly.

"Ghost! What ghost?" Things were falling into place with great rapidity, and it was beginning to get beyond me.

"You are quite right, Owen. She did. I had made note of it in my diary at the time. I just reread those passages a few weeks ago, after I heard of Dr. Fennora's death. It brought the whole visit back quite clearly to my mind."

"Please, Lady Elizabeth," I interrupted. "What ghost? What is it like? When has it been seen, and by whom?"

"Deirdre, Deirdre"—Lady Elizabeth laughed—"calm down. I shall answer you in good time." She settled into a corner of her mahogany sofa, fluffing up the rose-colored cushions for comfort. Every second of delay made me fidget the more. I have often been told that I lack the virtue of patience. I suppose that is true. I know I certainly had none then. Finally, having settled in, she began.

"Of course, I've never seen the ghost. I do not really believe there is one. After all, none of us—Mrs. Ling, Owen, Nicholas, or myself—have ever seen her and we are not only the only reliable people who might have done so, but also the most likely. We, except for Nicholas of course, are always

here at Moondragon. If she were to appear at all, it would surely be to one of us. Yet she, if she exists at all, has appeared to only three people: an elderly Irish cook of ours, nearly senile at the time; Hannibal Ling, who is a half-wit; and your dear mother, whose veracity I would not doubt for a minute were it not for the fact that she was in a family way at the time and, not unnaturally, vulnerable to emotional upset. Hers was, in fact, a very difficult pregnancy—there, I've said it, Owen—and one that ultimately precluded the possibility of more family without grave danger to herself. Naturally, under the circumstances, her sighting of a 'ghost' was hardly to be taken any more seriously than the sightings of the other two. The nightmares, on the other hand . . ."

Although the subject of my mother's nightmares and their possible similarity to my own interested me greatly, I was not yet ready to dismiss the subject of the ghost, however unreliable Lady Elizabeth might deem the witnesses to be. I broke in rather rudely, I am afraid. "Who is this cook you have mentioned? Might I speak with her?"

Owen answered with a shake of his head. "Poor Maurie's long since gone west, ma love. She was a dear old party, she was. Always had some treat ta fill the bottomless stomach of a gawky, growin' lad, and enough stories in her ta keep my hackles on end from morn till night. She had 'the sight,' ya know, or so she claimed, and somehow I never doubted it for a minute myself. She first saw the ghost shortly after Sir William died. Claimed to see it on and off for two or three years, maybe more, till she finally died. That must have been in 1854 or 1855." Owen broke off and looked inquiringly at his sister. "When did old Marie finally croak, Bess?"

"She died, Owen," Lady Elizabeth remarked pointedly, "in the spring of 1856, and she was quite addled for years before. Every Irish peasant woman over sixty claims to have 'the sight' or to have been born with a caul, or both! Really, Owen, you can be so gullible."

"Hannibal has seen this lady ghost too?" I pursued.

"So Mrs. Ling says. I personally have never been able to understand a word of his gibberish myself. Ever since he was about twelve he has claimed to see a Chinese woman in a gold robe. Of course, we all dismiss it as raving. After all, look at what the poor creature is." Lady Elizabeth was getting impatient with the subject of ghosts.

"Hannibal Ling is what is often called a natural, and very often naturals are gifted with the sight. Your cook, Maurie,

claimed to have the sight. There is no evidence that she was not so gifted, whatever senility may have done to her mind in her last years. My mother and her mother before her both had the sight. It was an accepted fact in our family, and was never questioned. My mother's condition at the time of her stay here may only have heightened her receptivity."

"Really, Deirdre, you cannot seriously consider that—"

"Be quiet, Bess. Can't you see that she's leading up to something? Go on, Deirdre."

"Thank you, Owen," I said, perhaps a shade too righ-teously to be polite. "Yes, I am leading up to something. You see, Lady Elizabeth, I, too, have the sight. I, too, have seen a ghost at Moondragon, and she is a Chinese woman in a golden robe. Am I as mad as Hannibal Ling, do you think?"

"Merciful heaven, Deirdre. You surely cannot mean it?" Lady Elizabeth was quite taken aback. Before I could go on, however, Owen broke in thoughtfully, with a perplexed frown knitting his brow. Clearly he at least took me to be serious and was concerned.

"It's devilish odd, you know, Deirdre, but goin' all the way back to the very first Chungs in Ireland, there's never been any mention of a ghost—not once—till the year 1851. Now, think a minute," he urged, his eyes lost in thought, his right forefinger wagging in the air between us. "What happened in 1851?"

"What did not happen?" I retorted ironically. "The head of the family was lost at sea, his son succeeded to the baronetcy, only to die himself, leaving as his heir an unborn son to inherit—"

"Precisely! An unborn son! Nicholas wasn't born, in fact, until January 3, 1852. A broken link in a chain that had never been broken before—not in generations. From the beginning, each father had passed on to his son the secret of the Cheng pirate hoard. Hannibal Cheng had given the secret to his son, William—"

"But William never lived to pass the secret on to his son. The treasure therefore was lost. Nobody knows its whereabouts now . . ." I broke off, my eyes locking with Owen's. Two minds with but a single thought! We spoke the words together, each knowing what the other would say.

"The ghost knows!"

Lady Elizabeth was exasperated. "Whatever has got into you two? I do not believe for a second in spirits, but I must admit that you two are beginning to frighten me. Stop it!"

"Do be quiet, Bess. This is important." Owen was too caught up in the implications of our conversation to stand on ceremony with his sister. "Deirdre, describe this thing you've seen, and when you've seen it."

Both my hostess, reluctant though she was, and her brother, eager as a hound on the scent, listened with rapt attention as I related in great detail each of my many experiences with my Lady of the Dragon, beginning with my first fateful sighting of her in Merrion Square on that frosty, moonlit night in January. When I was done, Lady Elizabeth was nervously twisting her handkerchief, silent and teary-eyed. Owen, after mulling over my words for a few moments, slapped his hands on his knees and cried out, "We're right, gel! This lady ghost, whoever she is, is trying to tell you something. You, 'cause none of the others who've seen her ever described anything but a Chinese woman in a long golden robe. She's only showed this dragon necklace to you. Don't you see what it means? She wants you to know about the treasure."

"But why me?"

"Ask her sometime," he answered flippantly, his laugh doing something to ease the tension that had mounted in the room. At that point Lady Elizabeth burst into tears and snuffled into her handkerchief. "Oh, Bess, for heaven's sake, do dry up! This is really interestin', and may be very important. You do want Nicholas to find his treasure, don't you?" Then, turning to me, he went on in his usual drawling manner, "Ya know, Deirdre gel, you say your mother's bein' in a family way may have heightened her abilities as a clairvoyant. Does it occur to you that your own bein' able to see—even to understand and communicate with—this lady ghost may be in part due to the fact that your mother was carryin' you when she first saw her?"

"It does occur to me. More than that, Owen! I've just been counting, and . . ." Here I threw propriety to the winds in the excitement that I felt in every fiber of my being. The jumble of puzzle pieces seemed to be falling into place with startling rapidity. Caught up as I was, I knew no embarrassment, but went on at a high fever pitch. "Look you, Owen, I was born on July 10, 1856! Counting back nine months . . ."

Owen did a rapid count of his own and cried out. "By damn, you were conceived in this very house! Of course, the lady ghost of Moondragon could pop up to visit you in Dub-

lin! She probably felt you were an old friend—'knew you when,' so to speak."

Lady Elizabeth moaned.

"Because of the accident of my conception here at Moon-dragon, a double psychic link—"

"Psychic link?" Owen looked puzzled.

"Yes, that's what the Society for Psychical Research would call it. A sort of 'spiritual bond' was formed between my Lady of the Dragon and myself at my conception—my mother, a natural clairvoyant herself, being the catalyst. It is why I, of all the clairvoyants who have seen her since 1851, see her most clearly and most often."

"This is fascinatin', utterly fascinatin', love."

"Well, I think it is too horrible. And the way you talk, Deirdre. It mortifies me to think that you should speak of such shocking things as . . . as . . . and in mixed company, at that. In front of Owen, of all people! Have modern young ladies no sensibilities whatever? No sense of shame or propriety? I can say no more! I leave you two to your own devices." Lady Elizabeth flounced into her bedroom in what Owen would have described as a "huff," slamming the door behind her. I started up, concerned that I had deeply offended her, and suddenly conscious myself of the shocking nature of my conversation with Owen.

"Oh, sit down, gel. She'll be all right by teatime. Leave her be." Obeying his impatient command, I flopped ungracefully back into the chair, knocking my head on its mahogany back as I did. It hurt, but I hardly noticed it, so caught up was I in the afternoon's revelations. Owen sat back against the couch and regarded me thoughtfully for a few minutes, sucking his teeth abstractedly the while. Finally he asked a question that was more a statement of fact, by the tone of his voice.

"You've had the nightmares too, haven't ya, gel?"

"Yes," I confessed, suddenly rather limp and played out by the tensions of the conversation. "They're the worst. I'm not afraid of her. She drains me, but she comforts me somehow, too. The nightmares, on the other hand, are a horror. I have them every few nights, and though I sleep soundly afterward, I always waken with a strange, vague feeling that something has eluded me, that there is some reason why I am being tortured so. The dream is supposed to mean something to me, I think. I am supposed to understand something from its terrors, I am sure, but what that might be, I just don't know."

"Are they always the same, lass?"

"Always!"

"Tell me."

And so I did. Every horrible moment, I relived in the telling. All the terror of the impenetrable blackness, the stifling airlessness, the repulsive flaking away of my crusted skin, the unbearable oppression, and, worse of all, the strange, eternal, deathless dying. To be dead and not to die! Monstrous!

At the end, I leaned back in my chair, tears welling in my eyes, dry sobs racking my chest. Owen stood above me and took my hands, gently pulling me up to him. For a long moment I stood close against him, enfolded like a child in his comforting arms. Then he drew away, and placing an arm about my shoulders, led me out the doors of Lady Elizabeth's sitting room and onto the portico. As we walked toward my own apartment, a balmy breeze blew across the sunlit bay, cleanly sweeping the dread oppression of the nightmare from my spirit. Owen stopped at my doors, and taking my shoulders in his two hands, looked down at me with unwonted softness in his usually mischievous blue eyes.

"You are played out, my love. Nap till teatime. I'll tell Kathleen to come to you in a while. And don't worry, lass. We're in this together now, you and I. I think we've got us a real mystery on our hands, but the bloody key is here somewhere, damn me, and we'll find it together." He bent down, kissed my cheek lightly, and whispered, "Rest you, now, *ma chère amie*, or you'll be in no condition to assist me."

I smiled wanly. "Oui, *Monsieur Dupin*."

Before retiring to my room, I watched him as he moved thoughtfully down the portico. Owen Sarsfield-Jones was not such a rogue, after all, I mused.

The Night of the Moondragon Ball

... and nothing is but what is not.

—Shakespeare

That glorious, long-awaited day finally dawned, and with it burst upon Moondragon the brilliant "sun" that was the much heralded Honorable Victoria Paget, youngest daughter of that celebrated darling of the Marlborough House set, the Earl of Wessex. She arrived early on a Thursday morning in the last week of June in the most elegant of all Moondragon's elegant equipage. It had been sent to fetch her and her party from Cork by the overland route, which I, fortunately, had been spared, thanks to the *Pride o' Bantry*. I say "fortunately," having noted, with some malicious satisfaction, the layer of dust and general aura of disarray that somewhat dimmed Miss Paget's luster. Moreover, I thought I could detect that her long journey had brought out a hint of peevish irritability in the English girl's character, a fact that could not help but gladden my partisan Irish heart.

To be honest, however, the Honorable Victoria Paget was, in Owen's phrase, a real stunner. She was very young, perhaps twenty, and had that flawless, warmly colored skin that brings to mind the bloom on a peach. Her hair was the thick red-gold of one of Burne-Jones's pre-Raphaelite angels, albeit worn in the latest London fashion—upswept in lush masses and rolls and fringed across the forehead. Her eyes were large—a trifle too cold, I thought—and of a deep dark blue. In short, her coloring was as rich and varied as my own was drab and toneless. Once I had been proud of my raven's-wing

"Black Irish" hair and those ever-changing hazel eyes, so very like my mother's, but although my looks had improved since my arrival at Moondragon, I knew that my features even at their best would never be a match for those of the Honorable Miss Paget.

Moreover, if her traveling costume was any indication of the rest of her wardrobe, she had exquisite taste in clothing, having the good fortune to know how best to enhance her tiny, well-proportioned figure. She wore a dark green linen dress and cape set off with rose and pistachio-green braid trimming, a pert little feathered hat, and the very finest Parisian kid boots, which showed prettily as she alighted from the brougham on the hand of Sir Nicholas. Ah, well, I thought upon seeing him—haughty and handsome and as broad and strongly built and dark as she was small and delicate and fair—with his future fiancée, they do make an elegant pair. It was then, as the two of them stood greeting one another beside the carriage in the courtyard below our vantage point on the portico outside my rooms, that Owen made his remark that she was indeed a "stunner." It was really not what I had wished to hear from him, under the circumstances. Could he not, for my sake, find her too short, or drably dressed, or otherwise lacking in attractions? But no, this is not the way of a man. A stunner she was, and, like it or not, a stunner she would be!

In the next second, however, my turn came, for out of the shadowy recesses of the brougham stepped whatever the male equivalent of a stunner may be—a demigod, perhaps, would answer.

"Oh, I do like that," I murmured, not quite to myself and not quite meaning it, either, though I sounded convincing enough.

"Like what?" Owen asked, rather abashed.

"That!" I said quietly and with a mischievous smile playing on my lips. I nodded down into the courtyard toward the demigod.

"He's a peacock!" Owen dismissed him with a sniff, having no regard for the fact that whatever the demigod might be wearing, he himself was dressed in brown tweeds, plaid waistcoat, striped shirt with plain collar and cuffs, red paisley neckerchief, green pocket handkerchief, and black boots.

The demigod did, however, go quite a way toward earning Owen's derisive appellation. He was a smallish man, very perfectly proportioned and lithe of build, wearing a dove-gray

morning coat, striped trousers that fell "just so" over the tops of his mirrorlike patent-leather boots, and accessories of the latest and most dandyish affectation. His cravat was impeccable, his studs and cufflinks large and ostentatiously bejeweled, his gray top hat a marvel of the hatter's art, and all the more so for having the honor to rest upon a mane of red-gold curls almost as carefully coiffed as Miss Paget's own. His hands, to complete this picture of sartorial elegance, were encased in mauve kid, while in them he wielded a gold-topped ebony cane with the *savoir faire* of a true *boulevardier*. Had he been in Paris, or even in London, all eyes would have turned in admiration. Stepping out of a dusty brougham on the cliffs of Bantry Bay in Ireland, he looked a perfect ass! I wouldn't dream of letting Owen know that I felt so, however. If he had his stunner to admire, I would ogle the demigod though it kill me!

We two were introduced to this elegant pair just before luncheon was to be served, and were immediately and peremptorily dismissed by both sister and brother as being of no consequence. Owen was obviously a poor relation and therefore unworthy of notice, while I, of course, was a mere companion to the lady of the house, probably paid some small living for chatting amiably with Lady Elizabeth of a rainy afternoon. I made up my mind that that false impression was to be got rid of at the earliest possible moment. Not that I had any snobbish motivation in wishing to correct the false impression caused by my brief and imperfect introduction; far from it! Had I indeed been a paid companion, I should have held my head high and been quite unashamed of the honest if undemanding work. Many a poor girl of decent character and family is reduced to such work, and often endures a humiliating place in the homes of the wealthy and idle for her pittance, but it was not only an insult—intentional on the part of Miss Paget, I suspected, by her sneering manner—that I, smartly dressed, obviously well-bred and well-educated and comfortably fixed, should find myself so slightly dismissed by this haughty pair, but also an even greater affront to my charming hostess, whose company was too much to be sought after of itself ever to necessitate paying someone to bear it. It behooved me, therefore, to make my true position in the household quite clear at the earliest possible moment. Actually, that should have been done by Lady Elizabeth herself—Sir Nicholas not caring two pins what anyone thought of Owen or me—but in her concern

over appraising and pleasing the girl she took for her future daughter-in-law, she had either not noticed or had chosen to ignore the slights of the Pagets, principally Victoria herself, to Owen and me.

When my position in the house was finally made clear to Miss Paget and it dawned on her that she had slighted a guest with as much right there as she had—and with some seniority, the main guest room being mine, by right of prior claim—she became all sweetness and light.

"Oh, do let's be friends, Miss Fennora," she simpered beguilingly. "In fact, I shall make a special effort to call you Deirdre if I may, though I usually find it difficult to be so informal with those who are so much my senior in years."

Owen blew bubbles into his water tumbler. Lady Elizabeth looked sharply, not, as one might expect, at her miscreant brother, but rather at the "ingenuous" Miss Paget. Even Sir Nicholas seemed to catch her intention. Only Augustus Paget (as my demigod was called) looked blandly oblivious of her cattiness.

I was not to be cheerfully insulted by this English bitch again without making some retort. "How unfortunate for you, Miss Paget, to have such a ceremonious nature. I, on the other hand, fall effortlessly into my ease with those I like, reserving formality for those I deem to be my social or intellectual inferiors. But let me put you at your east at once. I truly think that both our sensibilities would be satisfied were we to continue using our surnames rather than our given names. I have been inclined since our very first introduction to call you nothing but Miss Paget."

Her reply was as icy as I could have hoped. "Why, of course, Miss Fennora." From that moment on, Victoria Paget and I were at daggers drawn, and frankly, I was quite loving it.

The conversation at dinner that evening gave me further opportunity to avenge the slights to Owen and myself, which I must admit, piqued the two of us overmuch. The only difference between Owen Sarsfield-Jones, younger son, and the Honorable Augustus Paget, younger son, was the size of the estates to which they had claim. But for money, "Gusty" Paget, as he was so nauseatingly called by one and all, was no better a man than Owen. His reputation in London was worse than Owen's had been in the army, and I suspected that while it was Owen's clever but unchallenged and unused talents that were his undoing, in the case of Gusty Paget

there was not too much mind to be challenged at all. He seemed to be sluggish and slow of study. He had traveled much and had gotten little out of it, being both prosaic and unimaginative. Thus he would be easily led into trouble by others; Owen, having the keener brain, would find his own way into whatever occupation he chose—in this case, idleness and dissipation, unfortunately.

Owing to his insufferable inability to speak well or interestingly upon any of his many recent travels abroad, my opportunity to show the man up came before the meal was half over. He had been expounding at length upon his trip to Asia Minor and had been discussing his trip to Professor Schliemann's excavation of the supposed site of Troy.

"Fascinating place it must have been, I suppose, if you care for rocks and old pots." The Honorable Victoria yawned peevishly, bored with what for her must have been just another repetition of her brother's descriptions of his travels.

Ignoring her, he went on, "It's a big place, all cut up with trenches and earthworks. They say he's been at it for years," he added with a laugh, as if the poor chap must be quite mad and it was all a big joke.

"Where did you say this was, Augustus?" Lady Elizabeth inquired politely.

"In Turkey, ma'am, at a place called Hesselick," he answered in the patronizing tone one might use to the feeble-minded.

"Hissarlik," I put in pointedly. It was the first remark that I had made during the meal, and all eyes turned to me.

"I beg your pardon?" Gusty Paget questioned.

"Hissarlik," I repeated, as if he himself were feeble-minded. "I can assure you that the hill on the Scamandrian plain that the professor and his wife, Sophia—a lovely young woman, by the way, and very well-educated—are excavating is called Hissarlik. You are pronouncing it incorrectly."

"Oh, am I?" he remarked with a smirk. What, after all, did I know? He must have been thinking. He had been there.

"Of course," I remarked offhandedly, "I don't remember how the native Turks pronounced it, but in my conversations with the professor and his wife at the site, they always said Hissarlik, whether we were conversing in English, German, or Greek. Most of the time we spoke either modern or classical Greek, but whatever the language, we invariably said Hissarlik. Never Hesselick!"

"I see," said Gusty Paget, his curiosity aroused almost as much as his ire. He smothered both manfully.

"It is too bad," I added sweetly, "that you were there out of season. I'm sure you would have enjoyed meeting Professor Schliemann. If one has any influence or has academic credentials, one can generally prevail upon him to give a private tour of the dig. It is a most rewarding experience, I can assure you."

"Quite so," Gusty Paget managed to mutter through a fixed smile.

Victoria Paget, who had been silent and thoughtfully regarding me during this exchange with her brother, quickly changed the subject. The waters of Baden-Baden were a far safer—if duller—subject.

Later, however, Owen brought up the subject of the Trojan excavations again, obviously in an attempt to get these two out of their depth.

"Tell me, Deirdre, when was it that you were in Asia Minor, at Hissarlik, to be exact?" he asked, making sure to pronounce the offending word with easy perfection.

"Oh, let me see, Owen, that must have been in 1881. I remember Professor Schliemann had just been excavating at Orchomenus, and showed Father and me some of his discoveries. Of course, he and Father had been corresponding for years on points of Homeric language and history, so it was rather like a meeting of old friends when we all finally met at Hissarlik. That was just before we went on to Palestine and Egypt."

"You have traveled quite a bit, Miss Fennora. I had no idea," Sir Nicholas put in, rather surprised at my remarks.

"We have hardly had much chance to converse, have we, Sir Nicholas?" I remarked sweetly.

"Indeed, we have not," he agreed thoughtfully.

"Nicky, darling, do show me all over your fascinating home tomorrow, won't you? I declare I have never seen such a place in all my travels. Would you have dreamed, Gusty, that they had anything but whiskey, horses, and potatoes in Ireland? Moondragon is just too fascinating for words."

"Of course, darling," Sir Nicholas murmured, and returned once more to liquid-eyed contemplation of the simpering and arch Miss Paget.

Owen snickered into his wineglass and twinkled his eyes at me knowingly. Mercifully dinner ended soon after.

The following day, a Friday, Owen and I saw little of Sir Nicholas and his guests, who arose late and picnicked *à trois* somewhere on the grounds of Moondragon park. Generally they kept to themselves all day long, but occasionally we would get a glimpse of Sir Nicholas and the "August and Victorious" pair, as Owen had wittily dubbed them, as they either approached or withdrew from the precincts of the great house, sometimes on horseback; other times in a pony trap. It evidently did not behoove the Honorable Miss Paget to set foot to ground any more often than necessary. Walking was not her strong suit, it seemed.

Once, however, during that long hot summer afternoon, she did deign to walk in the huge formal Chinese garden behind the house, and with disastrous results. Owen and I had the delightful pleasure—as it was to us, malicious creatures that we were—of watching Miss Paget scream and faint dead away into her brother's arms, while Sir Nicholas chased wrathfully and helplessly after the elusive figure of the impish, repulsive Hannibal Ling, who, after frightening the lady out of her wits, was infuriating her two companions by scampering, monkeylike, along the high stone walls that enclosed the garden on three sides, remaining just out of reach of Sir Nicholas' riding crop the while.

Finally he resorted to Owen's trick of shying stones at the creature. The boy laughed droolingly and leaped, agile as a tree shrew, from the top of the wall to the first tier of the several red tile roofs of the pagoda-style Chinese bell tower at the far end of the garden, disappearing inside one of the many unglazed openings, to the accompaniment of the clangor of many brazen bells.

The Honorable Miss Paget had recovered from her faint just in time to witness this last exploit, and like Esmeralda at the sight of her Quasimodo, she let out a piercing shriek and expired once more, this time taking her distracted brother so by surprise that he had no time to catch her. Instead, she executed a perfect "flop" over a low hedge along the border of the path and landed on back and shoulders in the flower patch beyond, thus exposing an unseemly amount of upraised ankle and limb, as well as a pair of fancy, lace-edged silk knickers of the latest Paris make. Damn her, I thought, even pretty when she makes a fool of herself!

Owen, however, was less taken with the sight of her limbs and laces than with the general impression of asininity that the trio below us made with their various carryings-on. He

laughed out loud, a great guffawing horselaugh in which I joined heartily, albeit in a more ladylike and restrained contralto.

Thus we attracted the attention of Gusty Paget and Sir Nicholas, who were both so infuriated to think that we had observed the whole embarrassing scene that they each at once let go the upraised hands of the Honorable Victoria, inadvertently precipitating her back into the flowerbed, in order to shake their fists at us and shout imprecations down upon our unworthy heads. Yet another shriek from Miss Paget caused her brother to break off in mid-oath and rescue her finally from her uncomfortable and hardly dignified position. Sir Nicholas was irate, and took to shying the remainder of the stones he had used against his own particular Hannibal at us two poor "Carthaginians" on the "alp" behind him. Though his missiles fell far short of their mark, we beat a hasty and laughing retreat, lest he become so angry as to chase up the garden stairs after us.

Leaving the three titled gentlefolk to their own devices, we scurried around the side of the building and didn't stop running until we had reached the safety of my sitting room and locked the portico doors behind us like two naughty children. We then promptly collapsed upon the sofa and laughed till our sides ached. What larks!

"I declare, Deirdre," Owen cried out between gasps for breath, "you are a jolly sport! I haven't felt so young in years as I do when I'm with you. We could really have some high old times together, you and I," he added more reflectively.

"Why, so we do, Owen," I answered cautiously, my breath still coming in little puffs and wheezes.

"No, seriously, gel! I haven't given up, ya know. I realize I seem a waster to you, and of course, I haven't a sou, but all that might change. If it did, you'd have to reconsider, wouldn't you?"

At this point Lady Elizabeth knocked on the hall door, demanding entry, thus saving me the necessity of a reply.

"Whatever have you two done now? Nicholas is in a positive rage, Miss Paget is covered over in mud and tears, and Augustus says it's all your fault."

The two of us looked at each other and once more burst into gales of laughter at the memory of Miss Paget toppling over the hedge. As we dissolved into helpless mirth, Lady Elizabeth threw up her hands and withdrew. Clearly we were unregenerate rascals and there was no help for us!

Moondragon was certainly the most magnificent private estate I had ever seen, surely the most exotic one that one could hope to find in all the isles of Great Britain; yet, upon arriving that Saturday night at the head of the grand carved stairway from the quiet precincts of my rooms, the sight that met my eyes was one that took the breath from my body.

That great, dark, and rather forbidding palace had been transformed as if by magic into a fairyland of lights and ribbons and ropes of flowers and vines. Below me, the immense bronze incense burner that graced the center of the front hall—a huge ten-foot-high thing with dragons for legs supporting a covered urn from which sprouted bronze vines, flowers, leaves, toads, birds, and all manner of other flora and fauna—was aglow with the illumination of a thousand tall white tapers. Every projection upon which a candle could be affixed supported a profusion of waxy lights. Not a corner of the huge, ornately furnished hall was in shadow. Garlands of Moondragon's finest and most exotic blooms entwined their innocent heads about the roiling mahogany dragons of the stairway and hung from the beams and chandeliers like Spanish moss from the trees in lithographs one sees of the American South. The colossal porcelain and cloisonné vases that flanked each portal and entranceway below me were filled to the brim with masses of richly scented tropical flowers—orchids and lilies and strange fleshy rarities of unknown origin—all raised in the many glasshouses on the estate.

Having been most of the day in my rooms preparing for the ball, having dined *tête-à-tête* with Lady Elizabeth in her sitting room, I was in no way prepared for the changes that had been wrought during the previous night and all this day by a wondrous staff of servants and artisans. Now, having caught my breath, so to speak, I came down the wide staircase into the candle-warmed air, rich with the scents of wax and flowers, only to be nearly overcome by the assault upon my senses. A sudden cool gust of salty air coming through the open front doors refreshed me and prevented me from swooning. Guests, arriving now in pairs or small family groups, were being announced and greeted in the front of the hallway by Sir Nicholas and his mother, who, in turn, introduced the guests of honor, Miss Paget and Augustus.

Lady Elizabeth, whose toilette I had had so much to do with, looked, as I knew she would, youthful and radiant, her dark hair and vivacious black eyes perfectly setting off the

old-rose Shantung silk of her gown, so rich and stiff that it rustled gently with her every graceful move.

The Honorable Miss Paget, however, looked even more perfect than I had feared was possible, in a gown of corn-flower-blue satin set off with wheat-colored silk ribbons, yards and yards of elaborate quilling, and every border of every fold and overskirt embroidered with glossy wheat-colored silk flowers. Her bustle was absolutely unrivaled, of the latest style and shape, its very size enhancing the smallness and fine proportions of the rest of her figure. Twenty years earlier, her notorious aunt, Florence Paget, had been called by London society the "Pocket Venus." The description might well now be hers. Her uncovered shoulders and neck were flawless and set off perfectly by a cornflower-blue collar set with large brilliant yellow topaz studs. Her shining golden hair, styled in a perfectly gorgeous coif, was set with silk cornflowers and large topaz-and-gold stars. As she turned, I saw that she wore affixed to her low and becoming bodice a huge stomacher, also of topaz and gold, hung with innumerable seed-pearl tassels, surely Indian work and brought back for her by her father, the Earl of Wessex, who had been head of a royal commission in Calcutta but a year or two since. That mouth-watering stomacher was the final straw! I could do nothing but hate the sight of this spoiled, beautiful, petulant creature who would one day be mistress of Moondragon. In my eyes, her very perfection was damning. She had not one redeeming imperfection upon which I might hang some shred of sympathy. More especially did I hate her when I caught sight of myself in the long glass at the foot of the staircase as I made the last of my slow, distracted descent into the rapidly filling hall.

I had thought, until seeing Miss Paget, that I looked quite marvelous. I had chosen to wear a gown of black silk, that sad mourning fabric relieved by the mauve-and-silver trim of half-mourning in order to minimize the grim effect, out of deference to my hostess. Having recently regained some of the weight that I had lost during my father's last illness, I found that the bodice of the gown was rather becomingly tight, my bust enhanced by the extra weight and my shoulders not at all unattractive, especially set off, as they were, by the iridescent mauve silk tissue that bordered my own low bodice. The pleated black silk underskirt and the beribboned and quilled borders of my less fashionable bustle were accented by mauve silk roses entwined in a network of delicate shiny

silver vines and leaves. The effect, I had thought, while stark, was rather pleasing, and at the very least, dramatic. Now, as I stood gazing at myself in the glass, all black and colorless, with but one solitary jewel upon my bodice—a dark purple amethyst set in silver that had belonged to my mother—I could only think of how pale and drab I was, how the black drained what little color there was in my white skin, while a few feet away, a younger, prettier woman glowed honey and gold in the candlelight, every line of her gown, every gleam of her resplendent topaz jewelry calculated to enhance her already perfect coloring. There are moments when life just doesn't seem fair. This was one of them.

"Ah, well, there's no help for it!" I sighed aloud to myself and turned toward the open doors into the great main room of Moondragon, from which issued even now the swirling strains of the first waltz of the evening. The gentle swish and swaying of silken skirts and the sliding of gentlemen's patent-leather dancing pumps could be heard keeping gentle time to the music, as pleasant and distracting a sound as any low-spirited young lady could wish to hear.

Owen was waiting just within the open doors and had evidently been watching my slow descent into the hall all the while, as his first remark to me, perspicacious in the extreme, indicated. "No need to fret, my gel! She can't hold a candle! Positively insipid in that blue-and-yeller thing. Them yeller stones—topaz, ain't they?—make her look positively liverish, don't ya know!"

"Oh, Owen, don't exaggerate. She's young and beautiful, and I'm as pale as a raw scone in my mourning." I was feeling too low to bear his kindness. It smacked of pity as far as I was concerned, and I pitied myself enough at that moment to feel guilty accepting it from anyone else besides.

"Are ya, now, love? Well, we'll just see about that." He pulled me suddenly into the circle of waltzing couples, whirling me about the dance floor as fast as the music would allow—and perhaps just a bit faster. Around and around about me swirled the taper-lit, wax-and-flower-scented room. As we danced faster and faster, bits of the scenes in the room flashed quickly into my view and as quickly out again: ranks of gilt ballroom chairs flanking the walls; the musicians from Cork playing on a temporary dais set up at the far end of the room; garlands of passionflowers and roses and ivy festooning the walls and swooping gracefully from the huge, high beams of the twenty-foot ceilings; fat elderly couples sitting along

the walls, smiling wistfully, keeping time with the rhythms of the waltzing younger people that they watched; anxious mothers seeking out likely partners for their young, gauche daughters; candles and more candles in sconces and chandeliers and huge candelabra. Elegant young women and dandy young men flowed past, each pair sure that they were the most graceful couple, the one upon whom all discerning eyes rested.

Owen was resplendent in his lancer captain's dress uniform—gold-striped blue trousers and scarlet tunic, all gold epaulets and polished brass buttons—in which he looked magnificent, and which, unfortunately, he had not the slightest right to be wearing. He smiled engagingly, occasionally nodding at some face in the ever-growing crowd that now thronged the immense ballroom, but for the most part keeping his gaze fixed upon my own upturned face. He looked particularly handsome and very dashing that night, his cheeks hot with his exertion, his eyes alight with mischief and fire and self-assurance in the flickering light of the candlelit room. I remember thinking that one could hardly hope for a better-looking partner, or one who cut a finer figure. Owen was actually rather overthin, and a bit too tall for my taste, but in his uniform, which added the appearance of weight and bulk to his figure, he looked finer than I had ever seen him.

Suddenly, as quickly as he had pulled me into the whirling circle of dancers, he pulled me out again, leading me unceremoniously back to the mirror in which I had so ruefully appraised myself but a few minutes earlier.

"Look at yourself now, my gel! Still think so ill of yourself?"

And look I did, at a breathless, slender, elegant, and radiant young woman whose severe black silk mourning gown, cut in the latest figure-flattering Paris mode, so enhanced her ivory-white skin that it gave her the most dramatic and interesting air of romance imaginable. The touches of mauve tissue and silver—the exquisite mauve-and-silver roses set off by the one large glowing amethyst at her breast—were just the proper details for such a gown. The raven-black hair of this bewitching creature in the glass before me was shiny and clean, glistening with life, and set off perfectly by the roses and vine leaves entwined in the thick black locks. From the exertion of that wild waltz, one long strand had fallen loose from the coif and curled down the nape of her neck and

along the curve of her throat. With a graceful gesture, that bright-eyed, interesting creature—I—sought to sweep the unruly lock back up into its proper place, but was stayed from doing so by Owen, who grasped my upraised hands and pulled them down again.

"No lady looks properly danced with till her hair begins to tumble about her shoulders. You are a very beautiful woman, Deirdre, and no simperin' little English gel with blond hair and ice-blue eyes can turn the head of a man with two good eyes in his own head to look at you with and a good brain in his noddle to listen to you with! Remember that, and to hell with the Honorable Miss Paget!"

I smiled at his reflection in the mirror; he smiled back, and was off in a flash, calling over his shoulder that he'd return with some punch to cool us off. Once more my gaze returned to the glass, a sudden cold shudder going through my body. Behind me on the stairs stood an oriental figure, her outline in profile to me, her golden robe rich with brocade and jewels, her straight black hair knotted severely at her neck. My Lady of the Dragon, I thought, my heart fluttering in a strange sensation of mounting terror, which had never before accompanied the sighting of her now familiar form.

Slowly the woman in gold turned toward me, she also wishing to observe herself in the glass, and now I saw what I had not seen until she turned: the eye farthest from me was covered by a patch of black silk. The woman in gold was Mrs. Ling, tonight no housekeeper merely, but an adopted daughter of Sir Hannibal Cheng, and as such, a member of the Cheng family and as much a part of the household as Sir Nicholas and Lady Elizabeth, by rights more a part than Owen could ever claim to be.

She nodded serenely to my reflection in the mirror and sought to move on. Instead, I turned and boldly stayed her passing with a hand upon her sleeve.

"You look very lovely tonight, Mrs. Ling," I remarked uncertainly, not because she was not as I said—indeed, she was almost beautiful that night, in a formidable and forbidding way—but rather because I did not know how she would accept my remark.

She nodded in regal acknowledgment of my compliment, and answered more volubly and more graciously than I had ever suspected her of being: "We are both in exceptionally fine looks tonight, Miss Fennora. May it bode well for us both." With that she passed by and entered the ballroom, and

disappeared into the crush of recent arrivals gathered just within the doors. She was an odd woman, Mrs. Ling, and somehow I felt a poignant sympathy for her that night, cutting, as she did, such a strangely majestic and serenely beautiful figure, yet so isolated and lonely a one withal. That in itself should have been incongruous. Surely it was I, and Owen, Lady Elizabeth, the Pagets, and all the countless ruddy-faced Irish and English guests who should have been out of place and lonely in that monstrous Chinese palace with its silent oriental servants and portraits of Chinese ancestors on the walls. Surely, even more than the half-Chinese master of the house, Sir Nicholas Cheng himself, Mrs. Ling was a part of Moondragon and its world of oriental luxury; yet, of all of us, I felt, sadly for her sake, that she was most out of place, that she lived on the borders of all our lives; that despite the oriental splendors of Moondragon, this was no home to her, and that like my Lady of the Dragon, whom she so resembled on that night of all nights, she too was an outcast, lost and seeking something—what, I knew not—but perhaps something we all seek throughout our lives. In vain? I knew not, nor had I time to reflect further, for at that moment Owen returned from the direction of the dining room with two sloshing cups of punch. From the flush on his face I gathered that he had stopped for some stronger brew before returning to me.

Happily, my every dance that lovely night was taken. Moreover, the easy manner with which I had always entertained my father's colleagues and students stood me in good stead, and I found myself to be one of those persons to whom the gentlemen flocked for laughter and conversation. There was many an Irish wit there that evening, and not a few who knew of, if they had not actually known, my father. The banter was light, the conversation generally witty and gay, occasionally full of a lively scholarly challenge, thus making the hours fly swiftly. I went in to supper on the arms of two very dashing fellows—the one elderly and a flirt, the other very young and engagingly smitten. How could I not help but be flattered? How could I not help but glow? In fact, so happy and distracted was I that I had not even for a moment had time to notice the whereabouts of the Honorable Miss Paget. Lady Elizabeth I had glimpsed more than once dancing with her sea captain, but on the whole I barely had time to note the progress of their romance, though I had promised myself to keep a weather eye out, lest she need me

to help her in some way to slip away from her duties as hostess for a while.

Gusty Paget had surprised me by asking a waltz of me, and had not only been a graceful dance partner but had really been most polite and conversational, which rather took me aback and even melted some of the reserve with which I had behaved toward him. He was not quite such a "stick" when on his own as he was when under the influence of his uppish young sister, and so I warmed to him a bit, lest I appear to be uppish myself. On the whole, we spent a surprisingly agreeable time together, marred only by a chance remark of his sister's, which caused me to laugh out loud and Gusty to blush with embarrassment, though even he eventually had to give in and laugh.

The Honorable Miss Paget had just been brought up to our little group by Sir Nicholas, in order to meet the elderly Bishop Waterford of Kildare, as Irish an Irishman as ever followed the valiant and rebellious Daniel O'Connell in his fight for Irish freedom. On being asked by the dear old man what she thought of the country, she made the following reply in all guileless simplicity and with the very greatest desire to please: "Like the queen, I have always thought Ireland a rather hostile place that one visits as a duty rather than a pleasure. However, I am really agreeably surprised to find it quite charming. The natives aren't nearly so boorish as I had been led to believe."

It was here that I laughed out loud, for the bishop turned red to the roots of his white hair, muttered "Quite so," and gulped down the last of his strong, whiskey-laced punch. It went down the wrong way, causing him to choke. Gusty slapped his back obligingly, and the bishop, as a result of the sudden hard smack, managed to expel a fine spray of punch across Miss Paget's skirt before he was able to recover himself. Aghast, Miss Paget let out an understandable but nevertheless ungracious squeal of dismay and ran at once to repair the damage, leaving poor Sir Nicholas to apologize to the bishop for her remarks and to accept his profuse ones for having spoiled her dress. Sir Nicholas then shot me an urgent and infuriated glance, for I was by then engaged in—maliciously, I suppose—repeating her remarks and their outcome for the benefit of Owen, who had arrived on the scene just in time to have missed all the fun. Owen and I laughed so hard that even Gusty had to loosen up and see the humor of it all. He then surprised me by having the grace to apologize to the

good bishop himself on behalf of his sister. Even crusty old Waterford broke down enough to join in the fun. Sir Nicholas, whose future bride was the butt of all this humorous badinage, excused himself and stalked off in a huff to find his ladylove.

Occasionally, as the evening wore on and the crush of guests thinned, I would catch a glimpse of Lady Elizabeth being whirled along on the dance floor by one or another gentleman. Captain Vreeland was never far away, ready to retrieve her from her partner of the moment and whirl her away himself. She had evidently saved a great many dances for him. Finally the two disappeared toward the front hallway, on their way, I assumed, to get a breath of fresh air.

Somewhat later, I, too, found myself in the night air, strolling in the lantern-lit garden behind the great house, on the arm of Gusty Paget, of all people. He was being particularly nice, very informative on the subject of his own travels in the East, and curious about my impressions of Egypt and Sinai, to which he was soon to journey. So deep in conversation were we that we were practically to the bell tower at the far end of the long garden before we knew it. I had the impression that some rather urgent whispered conversation was broken off in the shadows of the tower as we approached. I assumed that we had inadvertently interrupted a lovers' tryst, and so, lest we cause embarrassment to some hapless young couple, I led Gusty back along another path, away from the tower, and toward the house once more. I remember turning once to see what had caused the sudden strange scraping or scuffling sounds that seemed to come from somewhere behind and to my left. The only reward for my efforts was a glimpse of a blue-garbed man—Captain Vreeland, I assumed—disappearing into the shrubbery along the far wall near another path that led to the tall, looming tower.

At that point my companion plucked at my shoulder in order to draw my attention to the figure ahead of us gliding up the broad stairs to the portico of Moondragon's second story. It was the gold-robed form of Mrs. Ling. Upon reaching the upper walkway, she turned, surveying the garden for a moment, and nodding, presumably at us—though I would have sworn that she could not see us where we stood, beneath the shadow of a tall willow that overhung the garden wall at that point—disappeared around the far side of the portico.

"She's an odd party, isn't she?" Gusty Paget remarked, almost more to himself than to me.

"One might say so," I replied in a deliberately noncommittal fashion. Mrs. Ling aroused my sympathies, and I would not speak against her even indirectly.

"I mean, one don't often see a one-eyed Chinese lady, does one?"

"Hardly ever in one's lifetime, I should imagine," I concurred dryly.

"Exactly so, and yet I'd swear she's the second one I've seen in the space of a year."

"Now, that is odd," I answered. Gusty Paget was ruminating, and made no reply for some time. Finally he went on.

"Trouble is, I can't for the life of me think where it was that I saw such a person."

"Think of other things, Mr. Paget, and perhaps the thought will come to you when you least expect it," I suggested helpfully.

"Perhaps so! Those Chinese all look rather alike, don't they? I mean, one Chinese lady with an eye patch would look more or less like another, wouldn't she?"

"More than likely."

"Yes, more than likely," he murmured as we strolled back around the front of Moondragon toward the courtyard, where several overheated couples cooled themselves in the night breezes from off the bay. A succession of carriages was pulling up to receive homeward-bound guests, and the heavy rumble of departing vehicles could be heard fading into the night down the long road to the gates of the park.

Gusty went on ahead to claim his next dance partner, while I reentered at a more leisurely pace and took a seat on a carved-dragon chair at the foot of that monstrous, candle-bristling incense burner that dominated the front hall.

"Mother, where the devil have you been? Do you realize how you have neglected my guests?" Sir Nicholas was whispering urgently to his mother around the other side of the gargantuan bronze. I could not help but overhear. The hall was darker now, many of the candles either having burned down or been blown out in the draft that flowed through the open front doors. I was not seen by them, and had I moved at that point, I might have disturbed them at an inopportune moment. Hence I thought it better to sit quietly until I might make a discreet exit. Moreover, the conversation began to take an interesting turn, and in the end I did not scruple to listen.

"Why, Nicholas, I have been here all evening, save for a

stroll in the garden with Captain Vreeland earlier. How can you abuse me so? I have danced with your guests until my feet are numb and my heart aflutter." Here she fanned herself vigorously, as if to emphasize the extent of her exertions.

"Where were you when I needed you? Victoria's skirt was nearly spoiled by that old drunk Waterford, and I could find neither you nor Mrs. Ling to go to her. She had to seek out her own maid, who was off somewhere with one of our grooms. It was disgraceful.

"And that's another thing! Do you know that I actually saw Mrs. Ling waltzing? It's all very well, I suppose, her behaving as she does at these affairs—"

"She is a member of your family, after all, even if only by adoption," Lady Elizabeth protested.

"All right, so she is," he acknowledged grudgingly, "but I'll be damned if I want to see her dancing, for God's sake, and in those ridiculous robes, too. She looked too odd for words. If she must dance, why can't she be got up like anyone else in a ball gown? Why, what will people think of me, letting that woman, got up like some heathen, and with a bastard son to boot, have the run of my ballroom like any respectable white woman? I won't have it anymore, I tell you. Victoria was too shocked for words."

"Miss Paget objected to Mrs. Ling appearing at the ball? Miss Paget objected to her dancing?" Lady Elizabeth asked, her voice rising in indignation. So indeed would my own have risen, had I been a party to the conversation in other than an eavesdropping capacity. What right had this haughty, spoiled English upstart to object to the few small pleasures of a lady of Moondragon, a lady whose unfortunate circumstances should arouse sympathy, not animus? "Need I remind you, Nicholas," Lady Elizabeth went on, "that Mrs. Ling is, by law at least, a daughter of your family, an heiress of Sir Hannibal Cheng in her own right, and a woman of education and breeding, if not of birth? Were she not of her particular race, her education and income alone would open many doors to her. As it is, her race, her terrible blind eye, and the unspeakable business of her son bar her from all society save that which we, in our charity and kindness, open to her. I thought people—other than your Miss Paget, it seems—have been particularly kind to her this evening. I deemed it a great kindness on the part of both Owen and that dreadful old rogue the Earl of Adrigole that they had the charity to dance with her and take time to converse. Many of the ladies,

moreover, were kind enough to have a word with her. It would have made me proud if you, my own son, had done as much. But perhaps, after all, you are too ashamed of your own Chinese blood to associate socially with one who, being an Oriental, you feel is looked upon as an inferior by those you wish to cultivate."

Lady Elizabeth's sharp dart hit its mark surely. Sir Nicholas dashed the champagne glass in his hand against the leg of the incense burner and stalked past me out into the night.

"You were harsh, Lady Elizabeth," I chided softly as she looked in tearful vexation at the retreating figure of her arrogant son.

"Perhaps I was, Deirdre, but if you heard our conversation, you know how right I was. He has no charity in him. None at all. His intolerance is bred from his own bitterness. He seems to have no pride in his blood. He hates the memory of his own father. He is only infatuated with this English girl because she's of the bluest blood and moves in society, and a marriage to her will make him feel more socially acceptable. He thinks he loves her, but he's only fooling himself. I see all this, and yet I can say not a word. Tell me, Deirdre, does she look to you like a girl in love?"

"In truth, no, Lady Elizabeth."

"Nor does she to me. She wants the wealth she thinks he has. The Earl of Wessex is a gambler. He lives on the money his wife brings to the marriage. She is a favorite of the Prince of Wales. They have three sons and two daughters to see to. If she does not make a financially brilliant marriage, she's bound to be a pauper eventually. And of course I am sure you have heard all about her aunt, Florence Paget, and that dreadful Hastings affair back in the sixties. The family has an unsavory reputation for scandal and fortune-hunting. Perhaps that is why she looks so far afield for a husband. Perhaps none nearer to home will have her. In fact, she has been out three seasons and is still unengaged! Oh, Deirdre, he is such a fool, my poor Nicholas!"

"Yes, Lady Elizabeth, I am afraid he is, but he is a grown fool, and nothing that you can say or do will make him see the light."

"That is true, my dear. Only too true! And I must live my own life after all, mustn't I?"

"Indeed you should," I agreed, a bit puzzled by the earnestness of her remark.

"Do you believe that we should find what happiness we can in this life, Deirdre?"

"Certainly in this life, for I have never yet been convinced that we have another in which to seek it."

"Thank you, dear," she said with tears in her eyes and gratitude in her whole aspect. Then in a moment she had recovered herself and was smiling across the room to a guest, whom she joined after excusing herself to me. Something was going on behind the calm, sweet facade put up by my gentle hostess to hide her inmost feelings. What it was, I could but guess.

It seemed that that night was destined to be one in which I heard more than my usual quota of interesting conversations. Just after Lady Elizabeth left me, I realized that I had torn some of the flowers on my gown upon the carvings of the chair in which I had been sitting. Before they actually fell off, I thought it best to mend the damage. Thus it was that I found myself upstairs in my sitting room preparing to reattach the spray of roses and vines that had come loose. Then once more I became the unseen eavesdropper on a private conversation, for I could not help but be attracted by the pair of masculine voices coming from the portico just outside my doors.

"So your father don't mind his daughter marryin' a Chinese? Well, the world's gettin' smaller than ever it was in my day, boyo. Oi'll grant ye that." I could not place the lilting Irish voice with its squarely, country inflection and speech. The stiff, cold hauteur of Gusty Paget at his most defensive was recognizable at once, however, in the reply.

"My father, indeed all my family, regard Sir Nicholas Cheng as a very fine man of culture and refinement. The blood, mixed though it may be, is noble. His is a very old family, after all."

"Oi, that's all very well, boyo, but what oi congratulate you all on is your allowin' her to marry up with such a poor fellow. Character and noble Chinese blood and culture and whatnot aside, it's mighty white not to care that he's in a financial bind." The old devil, whoever he was, let drop his bombshell with all the skill and subtlety of a cannon blast. It was so obvious by the tone of his voice that he meant to cause trouble that had I been Gusty I would not have deigned to carry the conversation further. Gusty, however, had no such self-restraint.

"Who says he's in a bind? Why, Moondragon is one of the

greatest estates in Ireland—in Britain, for that matter! True, its fame is not celebrated, but that is a matter of choice on the part of the Chongs themselves." Gusty's protestations were admirable, but his voice betrayed his sudden insecurity. He was not so sure of his ground before the seemingly casual remarks of the crafty old fellow to whom he spoke.

"So it is, my boyo, so it is—a foine estate—though Adri-gole House is a wonder the likes of which would make you marvel. None o' your heathen Chinese gimcracks for my seat, only the foinest furniture ever to grace the courts of kings. But to the point, Moondragon is a foine place, and he owns it outright, Oi'm sure. Oi mean, it's not entailed or mortgaged or nothing o' the like. Nor do Oi think he's in the hands of the shylocks yet, but, boyo, the lad has no cash! He's eatin' away at his principal already. The *Pride o' Bantry*'s an obsolete clipper on its way out East for its last run before bein' auctioned to the Aussies down under for their tea runs. They don't need no better than the *Bantry* for their wee voyages."

"Why, he's told Father that he intends to buy a London house for Victoria and a country place near our seat in Wessex. He must have cash. Sir, you surely do him a grievous injury to speak so." Gusty was on the defensive, but less convinced with every word he uttered in defending his future brother-in-law.

"Oi've met your father, boyo, and Oi'd be doin' a foine gentleman and friend a greater injury if Oi didn't warn his son," the crafty fellow went on smoothly, with just the right note of gravity in his voice. "Have a care, bucko, of the high-livin', big-talkin' Baronet Cheng. He's in up to his neck now. Why, he don't have the wherewithal to build the brace of new modern traders that he needs for the China run. Where's he goin' to get the cash for foine English estates and an extravagant wife?"

"I am obliged to you, sir. Needless to say that we had no idea that Sir Nicholas was in any embarrassment. My father will hear of this shortly."

"That's good, me boyo. Now Oi feel Oi've done me duty," he purred with an exaggerated sigh. "Now, let's have us a drink, shall we, lad?" The smooth Machiavellian voice sounded contented.

Still engaged in conversation, but of a more general nature now, their voices receded with their footsteps down the long front portico of Moondragon. Someone, and I could not

recognize the voice, was a party to much of Sir Nicholas' private affairs and meant him no good whatever. How fortunate that I had chanced to come into my rooms at that very minute.

Ignoring the still-disarrayed flowers on my skirt, I left the room quickly and walked around the upper hall to the head of the stairs, from which place I watched until Gusty Paget and his unknown companion should come in at the front entrance. A few minutes elapsed, and my vigil was rewarded, for the Honorable Mr. Paget soon appeared, his short, spare, dandified figure accompanied by that of an even shorter, very rotund one of a ruddy-faced squarely-looking gentlemen of about sixty-five, dressed in the dark blue dress uniform of a naval officer. He had Paget's arm locked in his own and was talking away at a great rate, one finger wagging amiably, and a broad, cherubic smile on his plump Irish face. He had done the damage he had intended by his remarks in regard to Sir Nicholas and was all pleasantness now, though the sparkle of sheer malevolence lingered in his glittering little eyes. I could see this was no man to trust. Gusty, on the other hand, was worried and distracted, his brow furrowed, his somewhat sluggish mind racing to grasp the implications of his companion's earlier remarks. Pretending to ignore the preoccupation of his young English friend, the villainous little Irishman, all chatter and hail-fellow-well-met conviviality, led the way straight into the dining room and up to the punch bowl, which by now was quite well spiked with strong Irish whiskey. Seldom in my life had I seen any human being who so raised my hackles as did this manipulating little man. There was a sly power about him despite the cherubic innocence of his short, plump figure. I could sense no good in the man.

I hurried down the stairs, keeping my eyes fixed on them the while, lest I lose their track in the throng that had gathered around the tables of punch and champagne, sherbets and cakes, that had been arranged after the supper hour. The little villain, as I could hardly help but think of him, was plying Gusty Paget with strong drink and talking unctuously all the while. It made me furious, so much so that I nearly snapped poor Owen's head off when he pushed up to me through the crowd about the tables.

"Deirdre, where have ya been, gel? I've got us a treat."

"Owen, do shut up. I . . . No, wait, don't shut up, after all. Tell me, rather, who that dreadful little leprechaun is—

the fat little fellow with the bald head and red face who's got Gusty Paget in tow."

"Him? That's just Arthur White, the Earl of Adrigole. He's quite an old pirate. His seat's Adrigole House, down the end of the bay." Owen passed him off with a shrug.

"There's no love lost between him and Sir Nicholas, is there?"

"No, none at all, though they're very civil about it. There's been tremendous rivalry on the part of the Whites against the Chengs ever since the first earl bought Adrigole House in the 1760's and discovered to his chagrin that the Chengs, though untitled and of mixed blood, were a far richer, more important family and with a veritable palace to boot. They've been tryin' to show us up ever since, turning their seat into a showplace—and it is that—to rival Moondragon. Of course, they haven't been able to do it, despite raiding Europe for every art treasure that they can get their hands on. Moon-dragon—ugly as it is to me—is incomparable. Indisputably that, what?" he asked, looking around him at the magnificence of our surroundings. "When Hannibal Cheng was made a baronet by George III for services rendered, the old earl nearly had a fit. It didn't put the Chengs on a par with the Whites, but it gave them the dignity of a title to go with the estate. No, you might well say that there's no love lost!" he concluded with a shake of the head.

"He's been telling Gusty Paget all about Sir Nicholas' financial affairs."

"What? How in the devil's name would that old bastard know about Nicholas' affairs? He's the last man Nicholas would confide in. He'd even talk to me first, and he thinks I'm good for nothin'."

"That's exactly what I was wondering. This man's up to no good, I can tell you that. You should have heard him. His whole manner was that of an insidious troublemaker. What annoyed me most of all was that that fool Gusty listened and didn't see that the man obviously had an ax to grind." I waxed rather indignant, not out of any love for Sir Nicholas—he could go hang, for all I cared—but rather because I detested the Machiavellian villainy of that cherubic little man with the practiced, jolly voice sowing seeds of destruction against his host while under his roof and drinking his liquor. He was a dishonorable little weasel, and I should have liked to see him get his comeuppance right then and there. That, however, was impossible. I fairly trembled with furious

indignation at the evil little man. Owen, sensing this, sought to distract me.

"Well, no matter now, love. The damage has already been done. I'll tell Nicholas all about it tomorrow. Meanwhile, the night is yet middle-aged, and I've got stowed here under my arm a magnum of Moondragon's choicest champagne, just waitin' ta burst forth from this bottle in a fountain of froth!" Here he waggled the laden arm in question and gaily waved the pair of champagne glasses that he had hooked between the fingers of his right hand. Offering me his free arm, he turned us about and began forging our way through the crowd back toward the stairway. Ahead, through the open ballroom doors, I could see that several hardy couples were still on the dance floor, though down at the end of the room the musicians were looking much the worse for their long exertions and the alcoholic fortifications that they had imbibed.

"There's a smashin' view of the gardens from the nursery windows," Owen said, leading me up the stairs and up another flight to the top story of the house—the precincts of Mrs. Ling and Kathleen, Lady Elizabeth's personal maid—which contained countless small rooms, seldom used.

Owen entered the old nursery room first, and setting his burdens down carefully, lit a small lamp on the low, round children's table in the center of the room, calling to me, "Come in, Deirdre. I'll light some candles."

As the room sprang into light, I saw the rows of old toys, a miniature theater, wooden soldiers, shelves of children's books, and a variety of schoolroom accessories all appear out of the shadowy darkness. It gave me an eerie feeling to stand there amidst the ghosts of long-ago childhoods—those of Sir Nicholas, William Cheng, old Sir Hannibal himself. Even poor Mrs. Ling must once have been a child in this room so many long years ago. They had all spent their early years here, straining at the bit on rainy days when they couldn't go out in the park, or perhaps restless and bored by their lessons, wishing instead to have their hands on the tempting shelves of playthings just beyond their reach as they did sums for the governess. So in my childhood had it been for me, a city child with only poor, pretty Merrion Square to distract me; imagine, then, the lure of Moondragon park. For over twenty years this room had lain unused, only now to be invaded by Owen and me, two grown-ups behaving like children with a stolen jam pot, but instead of jam we had champagne; instead of tummyaches, we would have

headaches for our wicked exertions. Well, little I thought of that at the time. Rather I went to the windows that Owen had mentioned and looked out upon the bejeweled scene below me.

The hundreds of Chinese lanterns strung across the garden were swinging gently in the mild night breeze, sending small pools of color in little arcs back and forth along the garden paths and flowerbeds. All around the walls, dense, shadowy masses of foliage and overhanging trees formed a border, but the center was clear and free of any obstacle higher than the couples who strolled aimlessly in the lovely dreamlike atmosphere of oriental magic. It was a beautiful scene to survey, for it was even prettier to look down upon than it had seemed from the paths of the garden itself.

"Turn around, gel. The cork's about ta pop."

Owen was standing over the little table, the neck of the champagne bottle between his palms, his two thumbs pressed against the base of the bulbous cork. He wore a look of utmost concentration and exertion, his teeth clenched in a dramatic grimace. Slowly he began to ease the cork out of the bottle. It moved slowly at first, but gave finally with a loud, familiar popping sound and a marvelous, geyserlike gush of white bubbles.

He filled the glasses brimful and handed me one with, not the expression of mischievous glee that I had expected, but rather one of soft-eyed mawkishness, which I took to mean that he was feeling a sudden attack of sentiment. By his toast, I knew that I was right.

"To Deirdre, the loveliest, bewitchin'est wench a feller ever fell in love with."

"Owen, that is a lovely toast," I murmured.

"Then drink to it, lass."

"I surely cannot drink to myself!" I demurred, using an ironic tone to cover my embarrassment and reluctance to encourage him.

"Then drink to us."

"Very well, then. To us—as fine a pair of devils as Lady Elizabeth ever threw her hands up over!" Here I laughed, hoping to break his solemn, sentimental mood with humor.

He winced at my toast but drank. "To us!" he repeated.

There was a minute or two of silence in the flickering candlelit darkness of the close, dusty old room. Then, breaking his own mood, Owen went back to being that bluff, hearty

rogue who had so endeared himself to me with every inelegant word and gesture of his casual, offhand nature.

"Can't ya sit in one of these wee chairs, gel," he asked, setting his own narrow frame into a child's chair with ease, "or is that damned bustle in the way? What do you females insist on lookin' so silly for? A feller likes ta see a woman's shape, don't ya know, not some wire framework that makes her look like a humped camel or a swayback mare."

This was more like the Owen I knew and loved. "I can sit down quite well, thank you, if I choose to," I answered levelly.

"Then plant that silly bustle, will ya, lass? I want to talk to ya."

"Owen, you do surprise me! I thought your manners had improved since first we met."

"Dammit, woman! Don't be coy. It don't suit; not at all."

"Oh! What, pray, doesn't it suit?"

"The occasion, dammit." Here he poured himself another glass.

"I had better have some more of that, too, under the circumstances." I leaned forward to have the glass refilled, and then, with it brimming, sat decorously on the edge of the little table, for in truth, had I indeed dared to sit in one of those little child-sized nursery chairs, the bustle, I am sure, would have fit in. Getting myself out, however, would have been another matter entirely. The table would suit admirably as a compromise.

I gulped thirstily at the wine, its *brut tang* feeling lovely on my tongue. "Well, just what is the occasion, Owen?" I threw caution to the winds and challenged him, hoping that by doing so I would keep the upper hand in the ensuing conversation, suspecting that if I did not, he would fall into that dreadful state of maudlin self-pity that had caused him to propose to me but a few days earlier.

"Gel, do you realize how you've changed my life?"

"How I've changed your life? In what way?" Of course, I knew he had changed since our first acquaintance. Even Lady Elizabeth had occasionally remarked upon it, but somehow it surprised me that Owen himself, irresponsible and devil-may-care as he was, should have been aware of it. He had never struck me as being a very self-aware person. Perhaps I had underestimated his sensitivity. I heartily hoped not; I was suddenly unsure of how I would handle a deeper, truly sincere Owen Sarsfield-Jones.

"Damn me, I don't drink half the sherry and port I once did. It don't work on me anymore. And the wenches—I can't do without 'em, mind—but rollin' about with 'em ain't half the sport it used to be. I've got no taste left for these stupid simperin' cows."

"Owen, you are being disgusting."

"Shut up and listen, gel. I'm bein' as honest as I've ever been with a female in my life before. It ain't easy, ya know, a leopard like me changin' his spots—especially at my time o' life. I may not put things just the way you'd like, but I got ta put them in my own way."

"Yes, dear, I suppose you must," I said with a sigh of resignation, once again surprised by just how much tenderness this silly rogue could evoke from me. I gulped down the last of my wine.

"As I was sayin', a toss in the hay just ain't what it once was. Nor the drink, nor anything else. . . . Want some more bubbly, love?"

"A wee drop, ma dear."

He refilled our glasses and went on from where he had left off. ". . . Nor anything else is half so much fun as it once was. Do you know why?"

"No," I lied demurely.

"It's because of you, gel. You've changed me. I'd rather sit with you and Bess over one or two sherries than have a whole bottle to myself in my room, the way I used to."

"It's never wise to drink alone," I murmured rather irrelevantly, and let some champagne roll under my tongue and along my cheeks, stinging the insides of my mouth rather pleasantly with its bubbles.

"Hang drinkin' alone! It's not just the drinkin'. It's the wenchin'. I don't want my choice of any lass between here and Bantry town. I want one lass."

"Don't be coarse, Owen," I chided mildly, licking the rim of my empty glass with a quick flick of the tongue. Owen obliged by refilling it once again.

"Deirdre, the one lass I want is you. I think of you every night. It's your bed I want to be in. You've bewitched me, I tell ya."

"Surely, sir, you are not suggesting that I . . . that we should . . . I mean, sir, under your sister's own roof . . ." I trailed off inarticulately, gulping my wine to cover my loss of words. Never had such a suggestion been made to me, and though I waxed indignant, I found myself not a little excited.

This evening was becoming rather an adventure. Unfortunately, Owen spoiled the effect by his shocked reaction.

"Deirdre, surely you do not believe me capable of such a thing! Or behaving in such an indecent manner to you, whom I love? Gel, what I'm tryin' to lead up to is this: I'm really in love with ya. I want to marry you, a decent, honorable proposal of marriage."

"Oh." It was rather a letdown, somehow. Once more my glass was empty. I held it out toward the bottle that stood on the table between us.

"You've had rather a lot, haven't ya, love?"

"I am doing quite well, thank you very much. I am quite capable of determining my own quota, sir. Another glass, if you please."

"Right you are, gel." Owen leaned forward out of the shadows and poured another glass, the light from the one candle on the table catching the gold bullion and brass of his epaulets and buttons and casting it back as little moving points of gold light about the room. The red of his tunic was as dark as blood in the shadowy flickering illumination of the quiet little room, and it gave me a strange chill of foreboding. Maybe Owen was right. The champagne might be going to my head. I swallowed down the first mouthful of the refilled glass to steady my nerves, the second to steady my hand.

"You're so beautiful in this light, Deirdre."

"That's very nice of you to say, Owen dearie."

"I'm goin' ta find Nicholas' treasure for him, love. I'm a clever feller when I'm moved ta use ma noddle. Used ta be quite good in the army, ya know, gamblin' aside. I'm a wizard with ciphers and such—any kind o' puzzle. Even after all these years of picklin' ma brains"—here he tapped his skull knowingly—"it still works up here. I'm bound ta find the Cheng treasure for him. He's way off on the wrong track, ya know, but I'm on the right one. When I find it . . ."

"You're surely not going to steal it, are you, old boy?" I vaguely remember asking rather conspiratorially.

"Lord, no! I may be many things, gel, but I ain't no common thief. I'll find the bloody treasure and hold him up for a finder's fee. That's only fair, ain't it? If it's as big as Nicholas thinks it is, I'd ask for twenty percent. That'd be fair ta him and still be enough ta set me up handsomely. Then you'd marry me, love, wouldn't ya? I mean, if it was my money that we lived off, and not yours? You'd know then I loved you, wouldn't ya?"

He was so earnest, so sincere, that it almost made me sick with guilt. Instead I began to weep, covering my eyes with one hand while waggling my empty glass toward the bottle with the other. I felt him steady the glass in my hand and fill it.

I uncovered my eyes and saw through a blur of tears that he was kneeling at my feet, his soft, gentle, normally teasing blue eyes so full of pleading lovelight that I hardly dared to look at him. Did I love him? Would his own money give him the self-respect to straighten out his life and make him responsible and respectable enough to be a good husband, or would he, as I had imagined during his first, less serious proposal, revert to drinking and libertine ways? What was I to do? He was such a darling fellow, such a jolly chap, such a good . . . "playfellow" might be the best word—but a husband? A father to my children?

"Oh, you darling man," I burbled into my glass. He took this for a sign of weakening on my part and lurched toward me rather unsteadily, locking his arms about my waist in a manner of utmost pleading. This sudden gesture upset my glass, which, being held at that moment to my lips, caused a cascade of chilled wine down my décolletage. I shrieked and lurched involuntarily, thus unsettling myself, Owen, and the little table on which I had so lightly perched.

The table gave way under what became our combined weight, for Owen, still kneeling with his arms about me, was precipitated on top of me as I slowly and, I hoped, gracefully slid off the tipping table and back onto my beautiful bustle. The nearly empty magnum champagne bottle slid down the pitching table and did a somersault over us, with a resultant cold shower of bubbly.

We lay there stunned for a moment in the shambles of the tipped and broken table, spilling champagne, and a tumble of little turned-over chairs. Then we both began to giggle and laugh.

"Owen?" I asked. Hiccup.

"Yes, love."

"Does champagne leave stains on black silk?"

"I don't know. Does it really matter?"

Hiccup. "No, actually it doesn't. I'm having too much fun to care if we have been"—hiccup—"christened in bubbly. What the hell!" I wagged my head gaily and raised my empty glass in a mock toast.

"What the hell, indeed. When we're rich, I'll shower you in bubbly," he crowed.

"May I bathe in it?"

"Only if I get to dry you off, lass."

"Owen," I remember giggling, "you're *terrible*."

At this point the nursery door flew open, slamming against the wall with a huge thud and the smashing of plaster as the doorknob went into the wall.

"You're damned right, he's terrible. What in God's name do you think you're doing, Owen? Seducing a houseguest under my very roof! How dare you?"

"Nicholas, it's not at all the way it looks," Owen protested, scrambling up off me with more speed than grace. He held out a hand to me, but before I could avail myself of the use of it, Sir Nicholas had shoved him away.

"Keep your hands off her, you rotter." He pulled me up roughly and set me on my feet. I was none too steady, but hardly pleased with Sir Nicholas, despite his obvious good intentions. His whole manner and the assumption that I would allow my honor to be compromised was calculated to infuriate me. As far as I was concerned, his interruption was both unwelcome and uncalled for.

"Just what are you doing here, sir?" I asked rather lamely and without purpose.

"What am I doing here?" he raged. "Do you have any idea the noise that you two tumbling about has made below? I should think, Miss Fennora, that you would be thanking me at this moment for saving your virtue." His eyes flashed hotly, the blackness of them like glittering obsidian in the candle-light. Two spots of color sprang out on those wide, honey-toned cheekbones of his. He was as handsome and passionate-looking a man as I had ever seen, with the muscles of his temples and jaws pulsing rhythmically in time with his anger. There was something about raising this man's ire that excited me. It was like playing a game, slightly dangerous but heady and satisfying at the same time. He seemed to bring out the worst in me—not the playful devil aroused by Owen, but some deeper, more arcane creature that lurked within my depths. As he went on, I was aware of him more sharply than I had ever been before. Perhaps it was my state of inebriation (for I was by then *very* inebriated), but I was conscious of every move of his broad, muscular body, every twitch of his muscles, every line of his limbs under the fabric of his impeccable evening attire. I was conscious of the tremendous power

and authority he exuded, and had a great desire to match it and challenge it, though I think I knew even then that it was a dangerous thing to try, and that that power of his could never quite be mastered. Perhaps there was the true attraction! He went on nastily. "Perhaps on the morrow, when you have sufficiently recovered from the excesses of your drinking bout with my uncle"—and here he glanced pointedly at the glasses and spilled bottle—"you will realize the danger from which I saved you and be grateful to me."

"Now, see here, Nicholas—"

"Owen, darling, do shut up. I can handle this"—hiccup—"quite well myself," I broke in. "I can assure you, Sir Nicholas, that I have no cause to be grateful to you. You wrongly impugn the honor and character not only of myself but, more importantly, of your very own uncle, who, sir, has just done me the very great honor to"—hiccup—"ask my hand in marriage. Having been aware for some time of the great charm and warmth of the men on your *mother's* side of the family, I have happily accepted his proposal."

Here Owen cried out, "Oh, Deirdre, splendid," thus somewhat weakening the effect of my indignant remarks by showing his obvious surprise.

"Quiet, Owen," I snapped. "So you see, Sir Nicholas, you do a grievous injury to both my future husband and myself." Hiccup. "You need not apologize to me. I understand that your motives, though misguided, were of the best, but I must insist that you beg Owen's forgiveness, lest"—hiccup—"rancor build in his heart against his favorite nephew." I knew as I spoke that I certainly had had far too much to drink. Even I at my worst would never have dared to be so priggish and haughty. Ah, well!

Sir Nicholas looked stunned for a minute, and then, collecting himself, said derisively, "But of course, my dear Aunt Deirdre, you are quite right." He turned to Owen and bowed gravely. "Uncle Owen, I owe you and your prospective bride an apology. Do forgive me my mistake. It was made in haste and before I was in full possession of the facts. What, after all, was I to think upon finding the two of you, dear Uncle and Miss Fennora—Auntie dear—sprawled across the floor in a welter of champagne and broken furniture? But enough! I wish you everything the two of you deserve. And now, let me leave, so that you two may get back to whatever it was you were doing before my untimely arrival."

He turned on his heel and left the room immediately, but

not before bursting into gales of mocking laughter, which echoed up the stairs after him as he descended to his remaining guests.

"Oh, Deirdre, you were wonderful." Owen laughed, coming up to me and sliding his arms familiarly about my shoulders.

"Oh," I cried, "that bloody bastard."

"Yes, he is, rather," Owen agreed, oblivious of my foul language. "Perhaps I shouldn't have accepted his apology quite so readily."

"Oh, you stupid idiot," I cried. "Owen, I could kill you."

"Whatever have I done, dearest?"

"Everything, that's what! Everything!!" Here I stomped hard on his foot in sheer pique and stormed from the room.

What was I to do now? I was not at all sure that I wanted to be Mrs. Owen Sarsfield-Jones, but now, thanks to Sir Nicholas and his infuriating insults, to say nothing of the thanks I owed to my share of that damned magnum of bubbly, I had got myself engaged. To back out would be to admit I had been wrong to begin with. That would never do!

Damn Owen! Damn Sir Nicholas Cheng, and most of all, damn the champagne! I had had quite enough of all three of them to last me a lifetime!

M. Dupin Investigates!

I designed to imply that the deductions are the *sole* proper ones, and that the suspicion arises *inevitably* from them as a single result. What the suspicion is, however, I will not say just yet.

—E. A. Poe, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*

Kathleen opened the louvers of my bedroom doors, sending long golden bands of sunlight across the ceiling and floors. It was the first thing I saw as I opened my eyes.

"Ohhh, damn that sun. Do close the shutters, Kathleen." My voice sounded like it had cracked in two.

"Miss?"

"Close those bl . . . Close the shutters, please." My head throbbed, my eyes burned, and my temper was foul. God help whoever crossed my path! I'd as soon have thrown a brush as looked at a cheerful face that morning.

"Are you feeling quite well, Miss Fennora?" Did I detect a purr in her voice? Surely not; Kathleen was too well trained for that. I must not lose perspective.

"Well? Well, I'm not dead, so I must be well enough, thank you," I grumbled, getting out of bed and into my dressing gown, with Kathleen's kind help. I might never have done it, otherwise. "I have the feeling that the only thing that will help me this morning is fried shrimp and African snails."

"I beg pardon, miss?"

"Nothing, nothing. Only, I can see that you've never read your Horace." My mildly humorous remark was lost upon the girl. She'd, of course, never even heard of Horace. There came just then a knocking on the portico doors in the sitting room. "See who that is, will you? I'm in no mood for cheery visitors," I groaned in a croaking voice as I sat before the

glass and tried to brush some order into my tangled hair. I had not bothered to take the pins and rats out of my coif when I finally got to bed, so the wreckage was awesome.

"Top o' the mornin', Merry Sunshine! What makes ye come so soon? Ye'll scare away the stars and shine away the moon." Owen bounced through the door of my bedroom with all the enthusiasm of a new-fledged, well-scrubbed parson, even to the ruddy cheeks and bright eyes.

I couldn't say a word, and even if I had, it would not have been a ladylike word at that. Instead, I heaved my hairbrush at his head, missing, but not by much, despite the state of my own poor head. The exertion of hurling that missile, however, set my brain into an ecstasy of throbbing.

"Ohhh," I moaned, catching my skull in both hands, lest it topple from my shoulders and roll bumpily across the carpet. "Owen, do go away."

He laughed softly and poured something—I couldn't see what—into a glass. "Here, drink this, love. I thought you'd be needin' my sovereign remedy this mornin'."

I hesitated. "What is it?" I asked, looking at the proffered tumbler with disdain.

"Hair o' the dog, love. Drink up!"

"Oh, I couldn't" My voice was still a raspy croak.

"I think you'd better, or you'll have quite a miserable day of it."

Realizing that Owen of all people ought to know the best remedy for what ailed me, I swallowed a long draft of champagne like the medicine it was, and within a few minutes was sufficiently myself again to insist that he leave my bedroom, which place he had no right whatsoever to enter. Seeing that I was indeed recovering rapidly, he beat a grinning retreat to the hall, promising to wait his breakfast till I was ready to join him.

Under Kathleen's gentle ministrations I began to look more myself, for she made an attractive pile out of the wreckage of my coif and selected a dress for me that had some color at the neck and hence made the best of what was, this morning, a stark white complexion and glazed eyes.

Within a few minutes, feeling fragile but improved, I was led downstairs to breakfast by a nauseatingly cheerful but otherwise very solicitous Owen.

Breakfast had been laid on for some time, since both of the Pagets and Lady Elizabeth were already at table and chatting rather gaily about the ball—or at least, Miss Paget

was. Lady Elizabeth, I could see at once, was giving only slight attention to the girl's chatter. Gusty Paget was in much the same state that I was in, and moreover, was obviously still ruminating over the revelations of the Earl of Adrigole. He had evidently not discussed matters with his sister yet, for her manner was still entirely natural, which, I am sure, would not have been the case had she known of Sir Nicholas' financial straits.

A pair of servants came in to replenish the supplies of food in the covered silver dishes arrayed on the sideboard. As I surveyed the choices open to me with some uncertainty, Owen helped himself to eggs and kidneys, several rashers of bacon, and piles of buttery toast.

In my uncertain state of health, kidneys and kippers and the like were out of the question, and eggs that stared like eyes from off the plate were not to be hazarded either, nor anything dripping in butter. I managed to find a rasher of very crisp bacon, a dry piece of toast, and with some effort braved the addition of a spoonful of well-scrambled egg. This, with tea, would be not only a princely breakfast under the circumstances, but also an almost miraculous one. It was certainly more hearty than the mere toast and tea that Gusty Paget was struggling with. Perhaps he hadn't had a "hair o' the dog" to begin his day.

My greetings to the company as I sat down were subdued, and I found myself all at once grateful to the Honorable Miss Paget for her continual banal chatter. It obviated the necessity of my attempting to be conversational myself. Fortunately, I had had my second cup of tea and was even eating a bit more bacon and egg—served to me by Owen with all the severity and solicitude of a doctor ministering to a patient—before it entered Miss Paget's head to turn her attention to me. Unhappily, I was in no real shape to rebut her with wit, but at least I felt sufficiently recovered to make some account of myself.

She began with great surface charm. "What a sweet gown that was that you wore last night, my dear Miss Fennora. But then, I imagine that a single lady such as yourself has a great deal of time for sewing, especially in such a quiet place as Ireland."

Suppressing the urge to fling the toast rack in her face, I answered in as honeyed tones as my still-raspy voice could muster, "Indeed, Miss Paget, many do have the time, but I, alas, have not. My long studies of Greek and Roman litera-

ture have left me little time for the pleasures of needlework. I am forced, therefore, to leave such tasks in the capable hands of my dressmaker. She's quite the best one in Dublin." I realized almost at once that this last remark had been unwise.

The Honorable Victoria Paget laughed, a shrill, bell-like laugh that went through my brain like a knife. At last she recovered herself. "Oh, do forgive me, Miss Fennora, but you cannot imagine how humorous that is—quite the best dressmaker in Dublin! Oh, that is droll!" She turned archly to Gusty and Owen, neither of whom joined in the joke, though each for a different reason. Even she didn't dare, of course, expect to be backed up in her little joke by her hostess, who had not even the benefit of a Dublin dressmaker, but rather, made do with the more than adequate services of the needlewomen of Moondragon. Lady Elizabeth, like the queen, was clearly *not* amused! Thus the humor of her remark fell totally flat—and she knew it—which was fortunate for me, since I was really in no condition to retort with sufficient wit and acidity to make up for the insult she so obviously intended. There was some small compensation in that she simply couldn't leave it alone. Since no one else spoke, she felt obliged to go on. I was still, it seemed, to be the object of her attention, lucky me!

"But you study the classics!" she persisted. "How very interesting! I expect it's the long hours over dusty tomes that give you those frown lines between the eyes. Still, I suppose a bit of a squint is better than that awful, owlish look that some scholars get."

I smiled benignly to cover the nearly overwhelming urge to spit in her eye that was rapidly taking my better judgment by storm.

"Nicky has something of a scholar's look, too, at times, but I shall soon rid him of that," she remarked. Then, looking up past my shoulder, she spied Sir Nicholas himself just entering the breakfast room, and added brightly, "Shan't I, Nicky, darling?"

"Nicky darling" grunted noncommittally, being somewhat the worse for his own excesses of the previous night. His greetings to us all were perfunctory in the extreme. Despite my ire at him for his presumptuous behavior in the nursery, I could only sympathize.

At this point I excused myself to the company and rose from the table, but did not leave until I had managed to get something off in Miss Paget's direction. "If ever," I purred

sweetly to her, "there was a man less suited to being called 'Nicky darling' than Sir Nicholas Cheng, then I can't imagine him."

The Honorable Miss Paget glowered; Sir Nicholas looked up sharply from the sideboard, where he, too, was now carefully selecting the least odious foods wherewith to tempt his obviously delicate stomach. "Why, thank you, Miss Fennora," he mumbled. "I do believe you mean that as a compliment."

Why not, if he chose to interpret me so? I leaped in the direction of thought that his own mind was moving in and managed to come up quickly with a good retort. "Indeed I do, Sir Nicholas. But in truth, we must be fair to dear little Miss Paget. She, perhaps, does not know you quite so well as I have come to know you in these few past weeks. After all, she has had less experience of the world and people than we. Pray give her time. She may well, one day, come to discern the vast differences between the Sir Nicholas Chungs and the 'Nicky darlings' of this world."

I smiled sweetly and left with some speed in the direction of my own rooms, where I became heartily sick in a very pretty flower-strewn porcelain *pot de chambre*.

It was not until nearly teatime that I felt really human again. I celebrated by taking a turn about the garden with Owen.

"I thought you were havin' a bit more champagne than was good for ya last night, gel," he teased playfully, "but you would insist that you knew your own limitations. Mighty haughty about it ya were, too, young lady!"

"I can see, sir, that I shall never be allowed to forget it, shall I?"

"No, probably not! But really, squiffy or not, you certainly gave Nicholas 'what for.' The look on his face when you told him that we were engaged . . ."

"Yes, well . . . About that, Owen . . ."

"You don't have ta say anythin', Deirdre, ma love. I quite well understand that I'm still on probation, so ta speak; that I'm still not your officially accepted fiancé. I know you only said what you did to Nicholas to show him up for the presumptuous bastard—sorry, love—that he can be. We'll say nothin' further of it to anyone just yet. Let them think what they will. Meanwhile, I'm still tryin', ma gel, ta win ya. I'll prove I'm worthy, young lady, or die tryin'." He laughed merrily, and I silently rejoiced at his kind understanding and

forbearance. He did not, at least, plan to hold me to my declaration. Of course, the easier he made it for me, the more chance there was of my eventually accepting him, as he no doubt calculated. Owen was clever! I began to suspect that he knew me quite well.

We walked on for a while, turned up on another path, and at last sat down on a bench beneath one of the overhanging willows.

"By the way," I interjected, wanting to break the too-pregnant silence between us, "speaking of overindulgence, did you know that Sir Nicholas smokes opium?"

"Opium? Nicholas? Never!" Owen looked at me incredulously.

"Indeed he does," I insisted.

"Why, Nicholas loathes any kind of indulgence or excess that might dull the brain. He takes no tobacco, and not even very much wine at all. In fact, he's usually abstemious in the extreme. To see him under the weather as he is today is a rare sight indeed. My God, why do you think he's got such contempt for me? It's ma drinkin', love. Even the wenchin' he'd condone, but not the idleness and the drinkin'."

"Owen," I persisted, "he smoked opium before my very eyes in the library the other day."

"Where'd he take it from?" he asked, a suspicious glint in his eye, as of light dawning.

"A cabinet at the far end of the room, beside the fireplace. Why?"

Owen laughed and slapped his long, slender thigh in delight. "I thought so! Why, that dried-out old chandu has been there since before Hannibal Cheng died. He was the family opium-eater, ya see. That stuff's been there so long, it's so old, that it couldn't give a pipe dream to a dog, let alone a man the size and bulk of Nicholas Cheng. He was havin' you on, love."

"Well, since I barely raised an eyebrow, it didn't avail him anything," I said with a defensive sniff.

"Lord, lord, I'd forgot all about that old stuff. I remember exploring that interestin' old cabinet with all its cubbyholes and doors once when I was a boy. I was with some of the local gentry's sons that Bess used ta invite over ta keep me company. We found the stuff and tried ta smoke it. It was foul even by then! Didn't quite make us dream, mind, but did we turn green! Little Nicky was only about four or five at the time. He came in after us, and we gave him the pipe. He got

sickest of all, of course, bein' the littlest, and I got the worst whippin' o' ma life. My, what larks we had back then." He shook his head in sheer nostalgic contemplation.

"Indeed! No wonder there's no great affection between you and Nicholas now, if that's how you treated him when he was a baby," I remarked dryly.

"He was a spoiled, obnoxious little blighter. Never could stand him maself. Deserved everythin' he ever got at my hands."

"Which was plenty, I'll wager," I answered.

Owen merely snickered wickedly. "Do you remember enough, love, of last night in the nursery ta recall what I said about the treasure?"

"Of course I remember," I cried indignantly. "You boasted that you were going to find the Cheng treasure and claim a finder's fee. Tell me, are you planning to take sail for China with Captain Vreeland in the *Pride o' Bantry*?"

"No, Deirdre, love, I don't think that that'll be necessary." He paused a moment and then went on, as if by way of explanation, though his tone had changed. "All the clues to the whereabouts of the treasure are right here before our very eyes, if only we'd see 'em. Once the clues are pieced together, it's all a matter of deduction. Once the whereabouts are deduced by reason and logic, then it's merely a matter of going to the place."

"Amazing!"

"It is quite simple, actually," he replied rather smugly.

"No, I don't mean it in that sense! It's amazing what the reading of E. A. Poe and Wilkie Collins will do for a man. You are, of a sudden, a veritable private detective. It's quite a rapid change, you must admit, from bibulous libertine to keen-brained sleuthhound, as the Americans would say. A truly amazing transformation."

"I say, love, you're bein' a bit nasty, what?"

"Oh, not really, Owen," I answered, feeling suddenly contrite. "You are a dear fellow, and I only meant to have a bit of a tease; not to hurt your feelings. Actually, whether you find the treasure—if it exists—or not isn't really important. It's the fun you're having that counts. It makes me wish that I were a man myself."

"I'm rather glad you aren't, love. I should have a devil of a time explainin' my attachment to you. But you are my assistant, after all! Remember?" he asked, somewhat taken aback by my remarks, and not a little bit hurt. "We're in this

together. The fun is for both of us, just as the finder's fee will be."

"Will it?" I asked in surprise.

"Of course. A sort of bride-price to prove myself worthy of your hand."

"Owen, you embarrass me. It makes me sound a terribly mercenary person, that you should have to find a treasure in order to feel worthy of me. You don't really understand my hesitation at all."

"Yes, I do, love," he assured me softly. "I know that you don't require that I be rich. But I require it. I've never done anythin' ta gain my own self-respect. If I find this long-lost treasure that's kept everybody hoppin' for a generation, then I'll have done somethin' that Nicholas with all his searches and scholarship hasn't been able to do. Then I'll have somethin' to be proud of; I'll be worthy of you, and I'll prove it further by settlin' down with wife and kiddies gathered around. At my time o' life, ain't that what I should want, after all?"

"Yes, love, actually it is."

"So there! You admit I'm right!"

"Oh, I guess you are," I conceded wearily.

"Hah!"

We rose from the bench and began retracing our steps toward the great house.

"Deirdre, love, are we sufficiently close and do ya trust me well enough to enter ma lair for a bit?"

"Your lair?"

"Aye, ma digs. The wee study or smokin' room or whatever ya'd call it right next ta ma bedroom."

"Owen . . ." I raised a warning finger.

"No hanky-panky, I promise. We'll even leave the hall door open, if ya like. You'll be safe as a baby. All I want ta do is show ya what I've been workin' on. I've got it all down in a notebook—clue upon clue. All it wants is a bit o' piecin' together." His enthusiasm was infectious. Caution to the winds once more, I allowed myself to be escorted to Owen's lair.

"Lair" was quite the proper word for it. Just as a bear leaves the debris of his dinner in the form of bones and fur upon the cavern floor, or the cavemen of old left traces of their passing in the form of bones and hand-axes, skins and primitive weapons in ever-succeeding layers for the delight of

modern archaeologists, so the detritus of Owen's life at Moondragon might well have been excavated and interpreted by some enterprising anthropologist. Surely what looked to be several years of tobacco ash piled in various brimming receptacles about the room would yield up fascinating data on the changing fashion in late-nineteenth-century cigars—Cuban or Mexican; and in cigarettes—Turkish, Egyptian, or whatever. The half-read books strewn about; the crumpled and in some cases yellowing newspapers; old socks, surely mismatched or odd by now; dirty glasses, their bowls still stained and sticky with the dregs of by now overaged sherry; and many an empty bottle all would yield up their story to the modern investigator, were such a brave soul to be found. It was truly a fine mess!

"Take a pew, love."

"Is there one?"—I asked, looking about in mock bewilderment. For aught I knew, pews, altar and baptismal font all lurked in the rubble-strewn recesses of that monumentally crowded and uncared-for room.

"Here, I'll empty a chair for ya," he said, completely missing the point of my little jest. "Sorry that things are in a bit of a stew. I don't let 'em clean up in here but once in a blue moon. They always get ma stuff set where I'll never find it again." He chuckled a pile of books and papers off a side chair and onto the floor. Stepping gingerly in order to avoid turning my ankle in the hazardous obstacle course that Owen's floors represented, I reached that one clear chair and sat down.

"I understand completely. There is no need to apologize." I smiled tolerantly, remembering my father, who was neater by a long chalk but still cut from much the same cloth nonetheless. Naturally, the very helplessness of the man was perversely endearing. It almost made me want to tie up my hair in a scarf, put an apron around my waist, gird up my skirts, and attack Owen's digs—as well as his life, which needed similar attention, after all—with dustcloth, broom, and rug-beater. Be careful, Deirdre, I thought. Far greater women than you have fallen into this pit, trapped by the helpless bumbling charm of the predatory male. Do not succumb to the allure of his guileless slovenliness.

Drawing in my breath in the stale, tobacco-reeking room, I urged Owen to get on with his clues. I was no longer nervous about the impropriety of being in his private digs—there was hardly room enough for a minor skirmish, let alone a full-

scale onslaught upon "mine honor"—but rather, I wished to breathe soon again the pure clean air of my own neat little sitting room, so comfortable and so pristine.

He was throwing scraps of paper right and left off the surface of his small campaign desk, the first piece of nonoriental furniture that I had chanced to see in Moondragon.

"The notebook's here somewhere." He looked up, scratching his head thoughtfully. "Ah, here 'tis," he cried, spying a small black ledger book tucked behind a stuffed owl standing on a shelf above the desk.

"Look ya now, love. I've been jottin' things down ever since I got the idea that somethin' was amiss here at Moondragon. Remember the eavesdropper?"

"Indeed I do!"

"Well, that set me ta thinkin'. Someone found our little conversation that night very interestin'. Why? Everybody at Moondragon, and, in fact, from here ta Bantry, knows the history of the Cheng family. But, the treasure, now, lass! That's a different story. Only the immediate family knows of the treasure and how its whereabouts has been passed on from father ta son since even before Moondragon itself was built—when the Chengs were rovin' pirates and no better than Barbarossa himself, despite their noble blood. Whoever was out there listenin' could've learned a lot, I'll wager. Now, look what I've done." He opened the ledger book to a page in the front and ran his finger along the lines of writing at the top. Then, sitting red-Indian-style at my feet so that I could see over his shoulder, he began:

I. Identity of Eavesdropper

(A) Possible Moondragon Residents

- (1) Hannibal Ling, who is half-witted and therefore most likely of no consequence
 - a) Opportunity—Yes! Always unattended and pops up everywhere.
 - b) Motive—No! His motive would be attraction to Dierdre, not to stories of a lost treasure, which would mean nothing to him.

Discounted.

- (2) Mrs. Ling

- a) Opportunity—Yes! Has complete run of the house, and whereabouts that evening undertermined.

b) Motive—None! As a family member, she already knows of the treasure and in fact has aided Sir Nicholas in his investigations for many years, both among the old Chinese manuscripts here at Moondragon and at the British Museum library. Moreover, Mrs. Ling has a comfortable niche and money of her own.

Discounted.

(3) Shi Fu, who has been Nicholas' loyal personal servant for years

a) Opportunity—Yes! Had been dismissed for the night and may have lurked around to listen rather than returning at once to his quarters in the village.

b) Motive—None discernible. Has been devoted to Nicholas and is intelligent, loyal, and discreet.

Not discounted but highly unlikely.

(4) Kathleen

a) Opportunity—Yes! Has no set evening duties until Bess goes to bed. Popped in with our sherry not long before the eavesdropper made his appearance.

b) Motive—Curiosity? Her class of Irish servant is notorious for it. A desire to find the treasure for herself? Nonsense!

Not entirely discounted, but highly unlikely.

(5) Virtually anyone who lives on the estate would know how to enter the garden from the park, but again, no likely suspects or motives.

"See, told ya I had a good brain in ma skull, love," he broke in on his recitation. "Shall I go on?"

"By all means."

(B) Possible Outsiders

(1) Captain Issac Vreeland

"Captain Vreeland!" I blurted out. "Oh, you cannot con-

sider him a suspect, surely? Why, he is the finest, most direct, and honest man one could imagine."

"The same could be said for lots of cunnin', devious fellows who hide their wolves' chops in sheepskins, love. Pray don't be so naive," he chided haughtily. "Let me go on."

"Oh, go on, then, if you must."

(1) Captain Issac Vreeland

a) Opportunity—Yes! It is known to me personally that he has been skulkin' about at all hours on the grounds. Moreover, I've heard a horse late at night on the road below Moondragon, and on land at least, he uses no other conveyance than horseback.

I looked up sharply to protest, but had no opportunity, for Owen interrupted his own reading at that point to interject another piece of evidence, which he then hastily penciled into the notebook.

"Deirdre, I'd know that damned sailor suit of his anywhere, and I've seen it on the grounds several nights of late. He has been here when he oughtn't to be!"

I remained unimpressed, watching him as he wrote in "Saw sailor suit." "Go on," I suggested, choosing to bide my time. I had my own contributions to make to Owen's outline of Captain Vreeland as suspect.

b) Motive—Yes! As the only outsider who knows of the treasure—after all, he has sailed Nicholas on every one of his treasure hunts along the coasts of China and Formosa—he might well want to find it for himself. He doesn't think much of the Cheng family and has never got rich in Sir Nicholas' service. In fact, Nicholas tends to treat him like one of his servants, not like a gentleman, which he is, to some extent, after all. He has no reason to be loyal to his employer.

Not to be discounted. The likeliest suspect so far.

(2) Some unknown person from outside the estate

- a) Opportunity—yes! While it would be hard to get into the grounds undetected unless one were very familiar with the estate (like the captain, for example), there are ways in which it might be accomplished even by one who was only an occasional visitor to Moondragon.
- b) Motive—None! No outsider (other than Captain Vreeland, again) is at all likely to know of the Cheng treasure.

Conclusion: possible but not likely.

"That's it, love. All my material on the eavesdropper. Shall I go on to my analysis of the next clue?"

"Not just yet. I have a few things to add to your outline," I remarked. "You haven't quite got it all down properly."

"Oh? Have I left something out?"

"Rather. Several points—some of which add up to something, one that doesn't."

"Go on."

"One." I began ticking off my thoughts on the fingers of my left hand. "The eavesdropper made not a sound when he left the portico, while Captain Vreeland's new riding boots are so creaky as to be laughable. Two. The captain, if he is riding into Moondragon park on horseback, is most likely to be wearing his new riding habit—which, incidentally, goes with the new boots—and not a 'sailor suit,' as you call it. Three. If he is riding into Moondragon, it may well be to conduct a romance with your sister—"

"Bess?" Owen was aghast. "She'd never do anything like that."

"Oh, wouldn't she? I'd like to think that I, at her age, would still be willing and capable of such hanky-panky. God knows you're no angel, and, after all, the same blood runs through both your veins."

"You're sayin' that my sister is—"

"Is in love! What's wrong with that? Aren't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"But what?"

Owen gave up and just stammered. He and his nephew were alike, or perhaps it was just pure bull-headed masculinity that they held in common. When would men ever learn that what is sauce for the goose ought equally to be sauce for the gander—and in fact usually was?

"To go on! Four. If he was on the veranda that night, it would very likely have been not as an intentional eavesdropper on our conversation about the treasure, but merely as a lover intent on a glimpse of his beloved or waiting for us to depart so that he might be alone with her."

"Really, Deirdre, you go too far!"

"Now"—I laughed—"you sound just like your sister. But do I indeed? The hell I do!" I went on ticking off my thoughts systematically. "Five. If Captain Vreeland does, as you say, know about the treasure, then he—like Mrs. Ling herself—would have no need to listen in on our meager conversation, which could have been informative only to someone who knew little or nothing of the Cheng treasure."

"Very clever, gel, but you've forgotten one more point."

"And what is that?"

"If what you say is true—if Captain Vreeland is wooin' my sister, Bess . . ."

"Yes?"

"That'd be a damned good cover, wouldn't it?"

"Cover for what?"

"He's a clever man, nobody's fool. He may be thinkin' along the same lines I am. If he were caught doin' some of the things I've been doin' these nights, his wooin' o' Bess'd be a fine story, believable, and one in which she, in her innocence and love, would back him to the hilt. Am I right?"

"He'd be a cad. Why, he'd be the bloodiest bastard ever—"

"So he would, love. He'd make me look a flamin' bloody saint!"

"No," I resisted adamantly, "Captain Vreeland is as direct and honest a man as ever drew breath. He's been in service to the Chengs since old Hannibal Cheng saved his life ages ago. It doesn't make sense, and I refuse to believe a thing you say."

"For a clever female, Deirdre, you're lettin' your romantic notions get rather in the way, ain't ya? What happened to that cool, unsentimental mind of yours, gel?"

I am rather afraid he was right. I was really altogether too sentimental on the subject of Captain Vreeland, but still I could not resist a retort.

"Oh, full of romantic notions, am I? And you are not, I suppose, 'Monsieur Dupin,' alias 'Captain' Sarsfield-Jones?" I teased nastily.

He smiled sneeringly.

"A hit! A palpable hit," I insisted. "*Touché, touché, touché,*" I laughed, clapping my hands delightedly.

"Sarcastic wench, ain't ye?"

"Yes, and you love me for it, don't you?"

"Yes, dammit, I do! Now, shut up while I read you ma next set of observations, if you please. I've gone about as far as I can with the business of the eavesdropper, so I've left a few pages blank and have gone on to list some other various and sundry items of interest—and important ones, no matter what you may think, ma dear. They're written down, but not in the form of an outline this time. These are just random jottings as they've occurred ta me, and are not always worded precisely or arranged in the most sensible order, so pray forgive the lack of organization."

"Forgiven," I said impatiently, and urged him to go on.

"I've labeled this section 'Curious Questions in Need of Answering!'"

1. Hannibal Ling pops up in the damnedest places and at the damnedest times. How does he do it?"

2. Where did that clump of dusty cobweb come from? It could have accumulated nowhere in Moondragon itself, for the house is always spotless.

"And is all the more so now in honor of the August and Victorious pair," he added in an aside to me.

Moreover, how did it get onto the veranda?

3. On the subject of the guardian lions before the entrance to Moondragon, why are the front paws placed in such an odd manner?

4. Why, in the painting of Sir Hannibal Cheng that hangs in Nicholas' library, is the book at his feet open to that particular page of that particular work?"

"Owen," I broke in, "have you gone off your head? What on earth are you driving at? The cobweb is a clue—I can see that! Maybe even Hannibal Ling's behavior enters into things, but the paws of bronze lions, the painting of a book in Sir Hannibal Cheng's portrait . . . ? You've lost me completely."

"Have I? Good; then maybe you'll be quiet and pay attention. There's not one thing," he said, pounding the open ledger repeatedly with his forefinger, "written in here that is not the product of long hours o' thought conducted over

many a pipe and the merest glass or two of good port. Every question is pertinent, though every answer is not yet fixed in ma mind. However, most of 'em are—and taken together, they add up to a solution to the whole plaguey mystery. Shall I go on?"

"Do," I allowed wearily, and he did—reading an endless list of ridiculous questions.

... 10. Why is that terrible bit of Pidgin English doggerel verse carved in the stone overmantel of the library fireplace?

"What doggerel verse?" I broke in. "I've never seen any such thing."

"The granite is so darkened with all the years of smoke and age that it's virtually impossible to make it out anymore, but it's there, all right, above the carved frieze of lions and dragons that hold the silver and gold balls in their claws.

"But to go on."

11. What is the meaning of Deirdre's recurring nightmare?

12. Why is Deirdre seeing the ghost, and what is the ghost tryin' to tell her?

I had had enough. "Owen, it's getting rather late, and before I retire, I've promised to look in on Lady Elizabeth."

"You're gettin' a bit bored, ain't ye, lass? Well, go on. Sleep on it for tonight, and maybe ye'll see things clearer in the mornin'. Night, love," he said, and kissed me lightly on the temple as I slipped out the portico door and began to stroll along the veranda toward the front of the house. The clean night air blowing from off the bay acted as a welcome cool and bracing restorative after the stuffy atmosphere of Owen's lair.

From the tightly shuttered doors of Sir Nicholas' suite at the front corner of the veranda came a pair of voices raised in violent argument. There was no way I could avoid hearing as I passed, and what I heard surprised me not in the least.

"Are you tellin' me, Sir Nicholas, that you can actually deny it? That it isn't true?" The interrogator was Gusty Paget at his haughtiest.

"I'm not telling you a thing, you insolent young fool. Anything—any discussions on this matter are between the Earl of

Wessex and myself. I see no reason to discuss such matters with a younger son." His vicious tone made Sir Nicholas' remark doubly scathing an insult. I could picture the look of ugly, bitter anger on his face as well as if I had been in the room to witness it.

"I'm Victoria's brother, blast it, and I've got every right to protect her interests."

"Gusty, for the last time, get out of this room. I have nothing further to say to you. We'll be in London in a week's time, and I'll discuss this whole matter with your father then. But until then, I have no more to say!"

"Well, I have! Victoria and I are leaving this house in the morning. You can come to London when you damned well please, but I'm getting my sister out of here at once."

"She won't go." Nicholas' voice was defiant, but I could hear the slight quaver of uncertainty nevertheless.

"Oh, won't she?" Augustus Paget sneered. "Well, she's packin' already, and in a proper fit, too. She won't even see you or talk to you. She told me so herself."

"Damn your eyes, boy. If you weren't her brother, I swear I'd kill you. But I'll leave my killing for better game," he muttered in a lower, more deadly tone. "Just let me not find the Earl of Adrigole within my sights any day soon. Now, get out of here before I forget myself after all."

An interior door slammed, and I knew that Sir Nicholas must have been left alone in his rooms. I might almost have pitied him if it hadn't been that I felt in my heart that it was really all for the best. The Honorable Victoria Paget was not fit to polish his boots, whatever he might think of himself. I passed on by his room rather sadly, for the anger and pain he must be feeling at that moment did not bear thinking on. He must lick his own wounds, as must we all in this life. Still, I could not help feeling quite down and alone for him as I passed, and oddly, perhaps, a little sad for myself too.

Ahead of me, as I rounded the veranda to the front of the great house, a figure awaited me, illuminated only by the long strips of light that filtered through the partially opened shutters of my sitting-room doors. It was my Lady of the Dragon, and she was waiting to escort me to Lady Elizabeth's chambers for my brief good night. How comforting it felt to have her silent figure to companion me even for those few short steps before she vanished at my hostess's doors. In fact, it matters not that she suddenly faded from my sight. Some-

how, I was not alone; she was still near me, perhaps closer to me than ever.

My sleep that night was restless and broken, strange images flitting in and out of my dreams in weird, surreal visions of humor or terror or exotic beauty. Small, vicious Pekingese dogs attacked playfully the loudly creaking new riding boots that crept stealthily, albeit empty of any wearer, along the long front portico of Moondragon. The portico itself was festooned with sweeping swaths of passionflowers and ivy, entwined with great dusty garlands of mouse-colored cobweb from which depended like bejeweled ornaments an array of phosphorescently decaying corpses—mice, bats, birds—and the busy, ever-spinning bodies of fat, poisonous-looking spiders. In my dream, Owen, dressed in full military kit, poured champagne in endless streams that ran like a waterfall down the back-garden steps and into the lantern-lit Chinese gardens themselves. There Lady Elizabeth, Kathleen, and Mrs. Ling sat sewing upon a fabulous ball gown, while the half-wit boy Hannibal, his face bloody and slobbering, rode about on one of the great bronzé lions that had stepped down from its eternal perch before Bantry Bay and now disported itself like a huge lumbering yet playful elephant, wreaking havoc with the flowerbeds and roaring a strange, gonglike metallic roar that sounded like nothing I had ever heard before.

Down at the far end of the garden, near the tall, pagodalike bell tower, Sir Nicholas and Gusty Paget played at billiards, using small silver and gold moons and suns in place of the usual ivory balls, and riding crops in place of cue sticks. The Honorable Victoria Paget amused herself by trying to snatch the small precious orbs as they rolled across the table. Occasionally catching one in her grasp, she would cry out in dismay when it turned to granite in her hand, and toss it back into the game with disgust, whereupon the little ball would once more return to its perfect gold or silver hue and again be the object of her desire. It seemed to me an endless and tiresome game, but the girl herself was amused.

Then, of a sudden, there issued from the bell tower the sound of one long, slow, deeply reverberating peal, as of a great brazen bell. All eyes turned toward the tower, from the several red tile roofs of which now ran dark, oozing streams of rich red blood. The sky above turned black, and still the redness of the blood shone vividly in the deepening gloom. Now all that could be seen were the red of the bleeding face

of Hannibal Ling, the oozing roofs of the bell tower, the scarlet of Owen's bloodred tunic, the bloodred blind eye of Mrs. Ling, and the crimson-coral lips of my Lady of the Dragon, who now entered upon us through a huge break in the high garden wall, borne on the back of the second guardian lion. She carried before her in one slender hand a long white taper that seemed to burn with a blinding silvery glow. It was the only touch of color left in the scene before me, save for the various shades of red, which stood out with all the dark richness of fresh blood.

She was beautiful and imperious, as I had never seen her before, my Lady of the Dragon; she rode in majesty upon the back of that lumbering, metallically roaring brazen beast, with all the serenity of an empress, and I knew of a sudden that that was exactly what she was—an empress of some long-ago time in some long-ago land. Her stiff golden robe was open and hung about her slim, naked form like a monstrous pair of wings. Around her neck, writhing like a living thing, was the Dragon of the Moon itself. Every scale was alive with motion; the large uncut jewels clutched in the claws of the creature shone dully in the silvery light, though its ruby eyes blazed with the fires of life itself—no mere reflection could have caused the bloodred glow that simmered like hot lava in those jeweled eyes.

But whatever the enchantment and fascination of that writhing creature, however perfect the ivory throat and naked breasts of my Lady of the Dragon, once one's eyes had lighted upon the huge baroque pearl that depended between those matchless breasts, no other sight could tear them away.

That pearl was the very taper light, for it was no flame that flickered atop the slender white column of wax that she held in her hand. Only the huge pearl itself cast that silvery, firelike glow, filling the ever-darkening garden with its moonlike light, reminding me of the great full orb of the moon, which seemed to hang over Bantry Bay larger and more perfectly than over the sky in any other part of the world.

Now, in my dream, that glowing moon-pearl filled the garden even as the heavenly moon filled our night skies, blinding us to the petty sparkle of the stars, illuminating each tufted cloud into a magic carpet of translucent gossamer.

Then, slowly, the dream faded; all that remained of my vision was that glowing moon-pearl. Gradually even that dimmed and died, leaving me in blackness and the merciful oblivion of truly deep sleep.

Yet, the night was not so soon over. More awaited me—more of torture and terror ere I finally shut my eyes in relief and true rest.

I lay upon my bed, but the bed was a bed of rock, stiffening my backbone till I thought it would break, imparting a chill that froze my very marrow.

Above me in the impenetrable blackness, the weight of a thousand tons of stone oppressed me, ready to drop slowly down upon me with exquisite deliberateness, snapping and crushing my brittle bones like kindling.

My eyes, dry and hard as the kernels in a nutshell, saw nothing—not the faintest ray of light, not the least image that a mind might conjure in the dark of night. All was blackness, profound as the grave.

My feet, bound till their very bones were crushed, burned with an agony that sent hot flames of pain licking along my shrieking nerves.

Around my neck and bearing down upon my naked breast with implacable force, the Moondragon coiled, writhing like a living thing, its icy scales scraping my skin till it flaked away like dust.

My lungs were filled to bursting with the foul stench of graves, and yet I could not breathe, nor gasp, nor writhe, nor move the least part of me.

My voice was stopped; no scream could I utter to release the agony and terror of my body and soul. I lay eternally, it seemed, in an ecstasy of excruciating torment.

Thus went the now familiar horror of the nightmare, always inexorably the same, yet this night there was a difference, for as I lay stretched out upon that chill slab of stone, I sensed that I was no longer alone. There came a breaking away of my bones; the dry twigs that had been my fingers were wrenched and snapped in the blackness of that nighted place by the clumsy, grasping fingers of a living hand. Then, somehow I knew, even as I lay sightless and immobile in that unknown place, that I had been shorn of something precious that had once been mine, that my broken fingers lay scattered like dry fagots along the length of my brittle body, that, thus violated, I was once more left alone in my tomb.

Was there never to be an end? Having died, would I wait forever for Death to come for me?

*The Words of
Cheng Ch'engkung*

The Dragon have taloon.
The Lion have paw.
Each of these Beastes bear in his claw
The orb of the Moon
And gold of the Sonne.
Lions do give
What Dragon have wonne.

—Cheng Ch'engkung, first master of Moondragon

The following morning, I lay motionless and spent from the terrors of my dreadful night. My eyes welled with tears of a sadness that knew no reason as I watched the grim gray light of a rainy early-summer morning filter through the still-unopened slats of the portico doors. Kathleen had not come to awaken me yet, so it must be very early, I thought.

It was just then that she entered my room softly, and I knew that the day, whatever it held for me—for all of us—must perforce begin. I smiled, not so much in greeting to her as in reassurance to myself that my face, if not my heart, was still capable of that expression. She returned my silent greeting with a wry smile of her own, and with a gentle, warm, rather personal tone in her voice, spoke to me as one might speak to a child.

"I was worried about you this morning, miss." She opened the louvers of the doors and went to fetch my dressing gown.

"Worried? Whatever for?"

"Why, miss, it's not like you, forgive me for saying it, to sleep so very late into the day."

"So late?" I asked, looking at the bedside clock, but seeing that it had stopped at something after three. I had forgotten to wind it at bedtime.

"Yes, miss. It's nearly noon."

"Noon? Why did you not wake me?"

"Indeed I tried, Miss Fennora, and you would not stir. I called for Lady Elizabeth, and she saw that you were quite all right—just very deep asleep—so she said not to disturb you. Mr. Owen said you probably still needed to rest after the ball the other night."

"Yes, he would think that," I remarked dryly. "I have not passed a very good night, Kathleen, so it is just as well, I suppose, that you let me sleep. Thank you for your concern, though."

"You are quite welcome, I'm sure, Miss Fennora. Perhaps it is as well that you slept. We who were awake have not passed a very pleasant morning ourselves."

"Oh?"

"The Honorable Miss Paget and the Honorable Augustus Paget have left us quite suddenly, miss, scarcely past day-break and without so much as tea in them. They would take a carriage only as far as Bantry town, preferring to hire a hackney coach from there. The carriage from Moondragon is already back in the coach house an hour or more. Sir Nicholas has not been to breakfast, but is riding like the very devil was at his heels on every bridle path in the park. He has sent a message to Captain Vreeland to say that the *Pride o' Bantry* is to sail for China on the very next tide.

"Mr. Owen is in Sir Nicholas' library—God help him if Sir Nicholas finds him there—with a ladder, a scrub brush, and a tub of soap and water. Lady Elizabeth has been locked in her rooms since just after breakfast and will not let anyone in. And then, forgive me, miss, you have been in a deep, unnatural sleep all the morning. It seems that only Mrs. Ling, Shi fu, the house servants, and myself are the same as ever we were. What has got into everybody?"

"Kathleen, I cannot imagine," I lied discreetly, more impressed with the uncharacteristic volubility of my companion than with the various activities of the household, whose motives I could divine readily enough. "Perhaps the moon is at the full and we are all lunatics today."

"You may be right, miss," she concurred solemnly with my jest, "for the moon is at the full this night."

"Is it?" I asked wearily. "I might have known!"

I sat at my dressing table surveying my face, pale and puffy in the gray light from the louvers. I looked as if I had slept overlong and yet not restfully.

"Will this do, miss?" asked Kathleen, bringing for my inspection a beautiful dove-gray linen dress with exquisite lace trim. It was one that I had not worn as yet, and in fact had forgotten all about. In my present mood it suited well to be out of black finally.

"Kathleen, you are an angel. It will suit perfectly." I smiled with genuine feeling and began to feel as if this day were not quite so terrible as I had imagined it would be. Even the weather seemed to encourage my subtle change of mood. The gray, overcast sky outside the doors to the portico suddenly gave way to the emerging sun, and the whole bedroom took on a new, brighter aspect.

"Shall I open the doors, miss?" asked Kathleen, noting with similar pleasure to my own the brightening day.

"Do, Kathleen! This day the sun is most welcome." The air was still very damp from the morning's rain, but it smelled clean and fresh and pure. Buttoned into my new frock, my hair done in a neat, simple coif, I stepped quickly onto the veranda and walked to the balustrade. Even as I glanced out over the wide, rain-misted bay, I could see the emerging sun beginning to burn the air crystal clear and dry. Bere Island came readily into sharp focus under the warm rays of sunlight. Soon the opposite shore would be visible through the haze. It would be a beautiful, warm early-summer afternoon. I stared happily, almost serenely, across the water, feeling the sun beginning to toast my hands as they rested on the polished mahogany railing of the balustrade.

Then, just as I was about to turn and reenter my bedroom, my glance chanced to light upon my hands resting on the wide wooden railing before me. The sunlight, strong and bright by now, glittered attractively upon the ring that circled the little finger at my right hand. It caught my eye and made me stop at once, a chill of abject terror stabbing through me like a knife.

I had never worn a ring in my life. There had been no ring on my finger when I retired for the night. From whence had come the one that now circled my finger, winking like an idol's eye in the brilliant noontime sun?

"Owen?" My voice was weak and trembling, so that I

hardly knew it as my own as I pushed open the library doors and cautiously entered the huge, silent room.

"Deirdre, love, so you're awake at last? Ya gave Kathy quite a fright, gel. Shame on ya! Come on in and see what I've been up to." He had his back to me and spoke nonchalantly from the top of a wooden ladder propped against that great granite fireplace that dominated the far end of the room to my left.

I stood just inside the door, my arms like leaden weight from the ordinarily minor effort of opening those heavy doors, my voice caught in my throat as I strove to speak. Finally I managed to call his name again, a desperate pleading in my voice, for I knew that I could go no farther, that the sheer effort of will that it had taken to walk from the portico through my rooms, out into the upper hall, down the stairs, and into this room with *that thing* still encircling my finger, was almost more than I could bear.

"Owen," I pleaded, holding before me my right hand with its beautiful, frightening, unwelcome adornment, "take it off for me, please." I sobbed convulsively. "For God's sake, take it off for me." I did not faint, I am happy to say, but I did slump heavily against the doors, feeling them close and latch behind me under the weight of my body.

He was down off the ladder in a mere second and across the room to my side in another. He caught me up in his arms and carried me hastily to the same cushioned divan on which Sir Nicholas had sprawled during his opium-eating charade. All the while, I cried softly, pleading that the little circlet of bejeweled gold be taken from my hand. Owen knew not at first of what I spoke, of course, for I was hardly articulate, but finally he was able to calm me, and, kneeling by my side as I lay upon the divan, he took my hand in his and examined the ring.

"It's a pretty bit of frippery, love. Has it got stuck on your finger? Is it cuttin' off the circulation?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I . . . I just cannot bear to touch it. Owen, I've never seen it before. It was not on my hand last night when I retired."

He looked at me for a long moment before the impact of my words finally sank in. Then he took up my hand again and slipped the ring off my finger almost roughly in his haste to examine it more closely. His rough handling bothered me not at all, so relieved was I to have the thing away from me. Then I looked down at my bare hand and saw that where the

ring had been my finger was stained brown and caked with dust.

"Look," I cried. "Look at my hand. What's wrong with it?" I felt an unreasoning hysteria mounting within me. Owen palmed the ring and grasped my hand in his, examining it closely.

"Just seems a bit dirty, love. See, only dust," he reassured me as he wiped all traces of the brown stuff from my finger with his pocket handerchief. Then, examining the ring more closely, he described it to me in great detail and in a very calm, matter-of-fact manner that was calculated to set me at my ease, for I was still so upset that I would not look upon the thing at all. "It's old Chinese gold, very fine stiff mesh-work overlayed with enameled bats and oriental characters. The central stone seems to be green jade, highly polished and carved in the form of a dragon's head. There's a decent-size baroque pearl in the teeth. And I know why your finger's so dusty, love. The ring's filthy with flaky brown dirt. It's all caked in the gold mesh and in every line of the carving."

"Owen, how in the name of heaven did it get onto my finger?"

"That, love, is a puzzle." He started to say something more, but he hesitated instead and changed both his tone of voice and his subject almost at once. "Mind if I keep this a while, gel?" he asked, and giving the ring a toss in the air, pocketed it even before I could give my assent. "Now, calm down and get your mind off this little incident. Come see what I've been doin' ta Nicholas' fireplace. Think he'll thank me for it?"

Led by the hand, I stood before the great stone overmantel and looked up. I laughed in spite of myself. "No, Owen. I don't think he will! You've made an ungodly mess, and short of grinding buckets of soot into the granite, I imagine it will take a century before the fireplace looks its normal well-aged self again." I saw now what Owen had been doing in the library all morning. With stiff brush and soapy water he had managed to scrape away, in wide, irregular, dripping swaths of brushstrokes, three or four generations of fireplace soot that had heretofore begrimed so picturesquely the huge carved overmantel that dominated the great library fireplace. From beneath the accumulation of ages he had brought to light the bit of ancient doggerel that he had mentioned to me the evening before.

His highly effective if very careless efforts with the brush

had made the deeply graved words immediately readable, and so I spoke them aloud in the quiet room, my voice, I noticed, stronger and less shaky than it had been but a few minutes earlier:

The Dragon have taloon.
 The Lion have paw.
 Each of these Beastes bear in his claw
 The orb of the Moon
 And gold of the Sonne.
 Lions do give
 What Dragon have wonne.

"Somehow," I remarked ironically, "I don't think the quality of the poetry itself is so very effective, nor the subject matter so pleasing to the soul that Sir Nicholas will think the revelation of it warrants the mess you've made of his overmantel."

"Don't ya, love?" Owen asked casually. "I think just the reverse. He well may go down on his knees, kissin' ma boots ere the week's much older. I've found his treasure for him, Deirdre, thanks to, my keen brain and your clairvoyant soul."

"Oh, you've found the treasure, have you?" I smirked, pursing my lips at his quiet, cocksure confidence. "Then you'd better tell Nicholas quickly. He may want to set sail with the *Pride o' Bantry* when it leaves on the next tide."

"Sa you've heard about that?" Owen asked noncommittally.

"Yes, Kathleen told me."

"It's a wonder he didn't wake ya with the announcement of it! Bess and I were havin' breakfast—the only ones in the house who did, by the way—when we heard him yellin' ta Shi Fu ta have someone fetch a message ta the captain, that the *Bantry*'s ta sail this night. Bess nearly had a fit, though I can't imagine why, 'less, as you say, she is sweet on her sailor friend after all. My guess is that Captain Vreeland will be furious too, but for other reasons than missin' Bess, mind. He's got fish ta fry right here, and he knows it too, unless I'm dead wrong."

"Dead wrong, I think," I murmured, more to myself than to him. At that point my innards gave a loud roar, and to my great embarrassment, Owen burst out laughing.

"It's a good thing, love, that the luncheon gong's about ta

ring. That's what ya get for sleepin' late and skippin' your breakfast."

I could not let that pass, and so, on the way in to eat, I apprised him of the reasons for my deep, late slumbers. He was considerably chastened, fascinated, and particularly desirous that I give him all the minutest details of both the dream and the later nightmare, the combination of which had come to make me dread ever sleeping again. "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep." Well I understood that line as I recalled the dreadful night I had just spent.

Lady Elizabeth, who usually liked to dawdle over her luncheon coffee, had rushed through her meal and excused herself abruptly, stopping only to cast an urgent glance in my direction and ask, as if it were a great favor, and a secret one at that, that I join her in her sitting room when I had finished my own coffee.

Consumed with curiosity, I hastened my own meal and soon came to knock softly upon her sitting-room door. There was a long pause, and finally the door swung back a tiny bit. When she saw that it was me, Lady Elizabeth let out a gasp of relief and fairly pulled me into the room.

"In quickly," she whispered conspiratorially. "Oh, Deirdre, you are going to think I am terrible, I'm sure. You may wonder what has got into me, but . . ."

I didn't hear any more of her excited chatter just then. Instead, I stood surveying the room. Boxes and trunks and all manner of luggage lay open upon the floors. Clothing was strewn about haphazardly upon every piece of furniture, and the place looked every bit as chaotic as had Owen's lair the night before. Through the open door of the bedroom I could see that room and a dressing room beyond were in similar disarray.

"You're running away to China with Captain Vreeland aboard the *Pride o' Bantry*," I said flatly, partly stunned by the suddenness of it and yet somehow not really surprised at all.

"Deirdre, how you do talk," Lady Elizabeth chided me in her now familiar way, but then added primly and with great firmness, "I have *booked* passage to China on the *Pride o' Bantry*. It is her last voyage as a Cheng ship, and since I sailed into Bantry Bay for the first time aboard her, I think it only fitting, and rather poetic in a way, that I sail upon her again this last time before she is sold."

Clearly her remarks had been rehearsed carefully—un-

doubtedly for Sir Nicholas' benefit more than for my own—though she now practiced their effect upon me. "Moreover," she went on, "since I have always wished to travel and never have, due to the press of obligations to my family, I think that it is only fitting that I now, finally, follow my own wishes and inclinations and take sail for that one place that I have always most desired to see ever since my dear William first told me of its wonders."

I opened my mouth to speak, not quite knowing exactly what it was that I wished to say, but having no chance anyway, for Lady Elizabeth raised her hand to restrain me and went along both breathlessly and defensively. "There is absolutely no need to worry about me, for I surely could not be in safer hands than those of Captain Vreeland, who has been in our service since the days of old Sir Hannibal Cheng himself. There!" She ended with a sigh of pleasure and accomplishment, like a schoolgirl who has learned her lesson well, and looked at me questioningly.

"You love Captain Vreeland very much, don't you?" I asked.

"Oh, Deirdre," she cried, rushing to me at once and falling to her knees before me emotionally as I sat perched daintily among her dresses on the sofa. "He is so very wonderful. I do love him. Am I mad to do so at my time of life?"

"No," I reassured her softly. "I truly do not think so, Lady Elizabeth. He seems to return your feelings very deeply. I thought so from the very first time we met in the Queen's Cove Inn. He gave me the impression of a man who was both honorable and gallant in his feelings for you. There is a light in his eye when he speaks of you..."

"Thank you, Deirdre. You make me doubly sure. I have had my moments of doubt, of course, but I feel certain that it is right." She was secure now that mine was a sympathetic ear, and so she confided still further. "I have actually booked passage—that is both for appearance' sake and for the sake of legality. Having paid for the privilege of sailing, I can hardly be refused passage by my son, should he find out beforehand, of course, any more than he could refuse any other paying passenger."

I looked dubiously at her. This reasoning might work with many another man, but hardly with the Sir Nicholas Cheng I was coming to know. She caught the look in my eye and smiled reassuringly.

"But do not worry, dear. Nicholas shall not know that I

have left until well after we have actually sailed." An expression of vexation passed across her happy face. "I had thought to have a few more days to prepare, but Nicholas has it in his mind to send the ship away tonight. The faster it goes, the faster it is sold, and after Miss Paget's departure, he feels he needs as much money as he can get his hands on as quickly as possible to win her back."

"Buy her back," I snorted disgustedly.

"Indeed! Buy her back. I doubt it shall work. Still, he tries like a fool. Anyway, since the ship has been ready for days and lying idle while Nicholas thought only of Miss Paget and the ball, the captain has no excuse, but must by all means sail when he is ordered. So there is no help for it. I must be ready and depart this very night." She smiled quietly to herself, as if in anticipation.

"You look so happy," I murmured, looking warmly into her glowing face. There was just the very slightest tinge of envy in my happiness for her. Would I ever feel so loved? Would there come such joy to my life, to my soul?

"Happy? Oh, yes, my dear, I am happy. It is such an adventure. We are to rendezvous outside Marseilles with another ship whose master is an old friend of Isaac's. He shall come aboard and marry us on the deck of the *Bantry* on the high seas, and from thence we shall sail as man and wife. I shall telegraph the news to Nicholas from Suez before we go through the canal. I daresay he shall be upset, but I have given him over thirty years of my life. The days that I have left are mine."

This last she said with a certain pride, and a determination and resolve every bit as deep and strong as that which had enabled her to endure the dutiful loneliness of the past thirty-odd years. Lady Elizabeth had made up her mind, and a light of hot Welsh-Irish fire glowed in her eyes. Sir Hannibal Cheng would have recognized the strength behind that conflagration and undoubtedly have appreciated it. Perhaps he had lamented its lack in his son William's softer eyes. Whatever the case, much of Sir Nicholas' own fire, as I had long suspected, came from this small, self-sacrificing, yet determined woman now on her knees before me like a girl.

She arose in a skipping little dance step and whirled about the room with her arms open in a gesture of helplessness at the confusion that reigned. "However can Kathleen and I pack all this? Deirdre, will you help?"

"But of course."

"Kathleen is coming with me, you know. She's young and strong and bright, and I didn't want to be a lone woman aboard a ship—even with a husband's protection and comfort. She will be such a help in so many ways. I have never done without a maid in all these years and would not be able to now, I'm sure. Then, too, I will not be married for some weeks, so Kathleen will serve as my chaperon and companion as well."

"Lady Elizabeth, it seems that you have thought of everything," I remarked in admiration.

"And," she went on, "she shall continue to serve me when we return. Unless Nicholas absolutely insists that we live here at Moondragan, the captain and I will live in his house in Bantry town.

"It's a dear, snug place," she went on headlong, "and just right for two old people."

I laughed. "Old?" I questioned mockingly. "You are as young as a girl, Lady Elizabeth." I turned to the door just then, for Kathleen knocked and entered with an armload of freshly laundered clothing to be packed.

As I helped the two of them, I reflected thoughtfully. Frankly, I saw little possibility of her leave-taking and marriage coming to grief. The pair of them cared too much and had too much to lose—Lady Elizabeth her reputation and son, Captain Vreeland his reputation and livelihood—to have made this decision in haste. Then, too, I discounted Owen's suspicions that the captain had designs on the Cheng fortune, wherever that elusive will-o'-the-wisp was hidden. If I had misgivings at all, they were, surprisingly enough, about what would happen here at Moondragon to those left behind.

I, of course, would return at once, however reluctantly, to Dublin. That I should eventually return was inevitable anyway, and so the mere hastening of my own departure was not to be thought of. No, I assured myself halfheartedly, my own considerations were out of the picture.

But what of Owen and Sir Nicholas, alone in the great empty place without the steady if not always effective hand of Lady Elizabeth? Nicholas would be lonelier than ever, having—I was sure of this, though he might not be yet—lost his Miss Paget for good and all. Now not even his mother's tender ministrations would be available to soothe him. He would rant about the great estate like a beast with a thorn in his paw. Owen would perhaps continue his fruitless search for the lost treasure but would ultimately fall back

onto drink and womanizing unless steered on some alternative course. Mrs. Ling would keep Moondragon in order, rule the servants with her impassive nobility as she always had, but something would have died out of the great place; a kind of warm glow that had kept these granite walls alive with the fire of human love would have gone out of the very stones themselves with the leave-taking of Lady Elizabeth Cheng. Moondragon would be a dead, chill place indeed!

By teatime things were in order. Lady Elizabeth's trunks and boxes, concealed from view in the dressing room, were ready to go, and now it only remained for Kathleen to finish her own preparations. Having seen to our tea, she went off to do just that, leaving Lady Elizabeth and me over teacups in what were to be our last private moments together for many a long day.

"You are nervous, Lady Elizabeth." I spoke smilingly as her cup rattled in her hand.

"Yes, yes, I suppose I am, but I am happy nonetheless."

"Of that I am sure," I concurred warmly. Again the tiny pinprick of envy entered my heart, not maliciously, for Lady Elizabeth had paid dearly in long years of service to her family, and I could not grudge her one second of the joy she felt now. She deserved well whatever happiness lay in store. Rather, I wistfully wondered if ever my face would shine with such inward light, if ever my life would open up before me like a flower and bloom with the sweet perfume of warmth and love, let alone the heady musk of passion that a secret inward part of me desired more than all else. That the dear lady before me was alight with the promise of such things gave me both pleasure for her and a great longing for my own poor self.

She must have read all this in my face, for she leaned toward me as I sat beside her on the sofa and placed a hand upon my arm.

"There is much ahead of you, too, my dear. A whole lifetime."

"Indeed." I smiled, ashamed that my face had so reflected my selfish thoughts, and guilty that, even for a moment, Lady Elizabeth should be distracted from her own joys to my uncertainties. "How," I asked, changing the subject, lest we begin to speak of too personal matters, "how do you intend breaking your news to Sir Nicholas and Owen?"

"I have written them letters, which will be delivered on the morrow at luncheon. By then we will be well away to sea."

"But surely there is no way that you and your impedimenta can leave without Sir Nicholas seeing you?"

"Ah, but yes, there is. I have had it planned for days. The only change is that the plan must be put into effect earlier than we had expected. In fact, Nicholas himself has inadvertently made it easier for us."

"How so?"

"The ship will sail tonight from Bantry town on the evening tide. Nicholas, bless him, plans to see it off and then take dinner in the town. The very moment he leaves this later afternoon—perhaps within not much more an hour now—I shall have all my things carried down by a coachman and groom, sworn to secrecy I might add, and we shall go off in a closed coach to the inlet down toward Adrigole. From the highroad at that point there is a footpath down to the bay. Captain Vreeland will have a longboat and several seamen waiting to take our things and row us out to the *Bantry* as it sails by on the evening tide.

"Mrs. Ling is always taking an early dinner in her room at the back of the house at that time, the house servants will be gone, and the others will be readying dinner in the kitchens, so the timing is perfect. I shall have a dreadful headache and leave word that I have taken to my room for the evening with Kathleen for company. Nicholas will not suspect a thing, especially now, poor dear, that he is so distracted by his break with Miss Paget—the not so Honorable Miss Paget!" Lady Elizabeth quipped. She had a look on her face upon making that statement which showed a deep inner satisfaction. She obviously thought her son well out of that affair, and I could not help but agree, however hurt he might be at the present time.

"But what of Owen?" I asked, suddenly thinking of the one person not yet accounted for. "He will be at home, surely?"

"Yes, Deirdre, and he will be distracted, too. By you! Keep him in the gardens as I am leaving, and then keep him long over dinner. He is lighthearted and very easily occupied." She took my hand imploringly. "I am sorry to require your help in deceiving them, Deirdre, but there seems to be no other way. Once they have accepted the fact of my departure—and an abrupt one, admitting of no time for argument, is the only sensible way—they will readily adjust, and will not, I am sure, blame you for your small part in this little drama. In time they shall even forgive me," she whispered quietly to herself.

"That is true enough," I said simply. "And it hardly matters if they forgive me or not. I shan't stay but a day or two beyond your own leave-taking."

"And pray, why so? Why should you not stay on all summer, as we had planned?"

"Lady Elizabeth," I stammered, shocked somehow that she should have assumed I would even think of staying beyond her own departure, "I surely cannot stay now? Whatever would people think? I would be alone with two men . . ."

"And Mrs. Ling."

"And Mrs. Ling! She is hardly a chaperon."

"She is a housekeeper, granted, but also she is a lady of the house, as I am myself. It would be perfectly proper."

"Well," I conceded grudgingly, for that reasoning had not occurred to me, "so it might be, but I am your guest, not that of either Sir Nicholas or Owen."

"And in my letters to them, and to Mrs. Ling, in fact, I have commended you to their care in place of my own. There is no question but that you will stay. I have planned on it, in fact. If you do not, who will care for them in my absence?"

"Care for them? Why, Mrs. Ling, of course!"

"Oh, I do not mean 'see to their needs,' as she does and as the servants do." Lady Elizabeth waved her little hand impatiently in dismissal of my remark. "Who but you will see to them; who will love them and be a family to them?" Who will keep these great granite stones warm and alive? She might have asked, had she been disposed, as I had been earlier, to reflection.

"Surely not I?" I protested, at once taken aback by the proposal and yet seeing something of the possibilities as well.

"And why not? Owen adores you—a bit too much for your own good, I fear—and Nicholas . . ."

"Nicholas loathes me." I did not confess that I had but small liking for him. It was surely too obvious in my manner already in the previous few weeks for his mother not to have seen it for herself.

"Do you think so, my dear?" she asked casually. "I rather thought that he begins to find you challenging and very interesting. He has not known many women—fewer still who were really well-educated as himself—and never one who could so forcefully say no to him."

"Say no to him!" I snorted. As if there was any attraction in that!

"Indeed! *No!* It is lamentable, perhaps, and I should be loath to admit it to any but you, but I have never been able to refuse the boy a thing. He had no father, poor dear, and so I tried to make up for it, I suppose. I suspect it was very wrong of me, but there it is. The damage is done and cannot be undone—by me."

"Nor by anyone else," I added dryly.

"Perhaps not, perhaps not. But he does need caring for and understanding. He feels things very deeply, you know."

"Nicholas?" I cried, but then said no more, remembering the infinite pain that had seemed to emanate from the silence that fell upon his room the night before after Gusty Paget had stormed out. I had felt in sympathy with him then; there had been no anger in him then, though I felt sure that, had I chanced to knock, as an intruder bent on comforting him, at his portico door, he would have greeted me with anger, would have rebuffed my kindness with anger, would not have dared to show any other emotion than anger. Only in anger could he hide the weakness that was his deeper feelings. Poor man.

"Yes, Lady Elizabeth, I think you are right. He does feel things deeply." Yet he dare not show them, I added to myself.

"Will you stay and care for him?" she pressed.

"I shall stay until he orders me out or hurls me bodily from the portico, whichever act of violence comes first." I laughed, wondering how short a time it would take for me to have provoked one or other act on his part.

"Oh, he will do neither, I am sure," Lady Elizabeth demurred quietly. "Owen," she went on in a different tone of voice, "is no trouble at all. He will go on in his own way till the end of time. He's very clever, full of great momentary enthusiasms that take up his empty life for a while, but which, at last, fizzle an and die. He is too clever by half, Deirdre, and, I hate to say it, as light and superficial as a zephyr." Her voice, during this harsh indictment of her younger brother, held the warning note of a confiding mother.

"Do you really think so? I have had that impression too, I confess, but he sometimes seems as if on the brink of greater things."

"Yes," she agreed sadly, "and to his dying day, like the perpetual youth that he is, he will always seem to be. It is part of his charm, but it is only charm, Deirdre, and not something to throw one's life away upon."

I caught her meaning at once, and it embarrassed us both. Abruptly we each set down our cold, nearly untouched cups and as a welcome change of subject bade each other a fond farewell.

"I will come one last time and see you off," I whispered, and hugged her lovingly. In actuality, our later leave-taking was to be different than either of us had intended, for within the hour she came into the Chinese garden from the portico, where she found Owen and me in meditation over the various possible meanings of my dream and the recurring nightmare.

I caught sight of her first and saw by her face that she had just taken leave of Sir Nicholas, whose carriage I could even now hear receding along the road to the great gates of Moon-dragon park. Her face showed both sadness and determination. Then, steeling herself for the last of the ordeal, she put on a cheery smile and raised her voice to us.

"Hallo, Nicholas has just left for Bantry. I'm off in a moment," she said, indicating her newly-put-on traveling-costume, "to make a duty call upon some old ladies in Adrigole. I shall take Kathleen along for company and shan't be back till just before dinner. I expect that I shall take that in my room." She came up and hugged me close. "Take care of my boys for me, Deirdre."

"So I shall," I murmured feelingly, and turned away, lest we catch each other's eyes and not be able to contain our emotions.

"Owen"—she smiled, trying to keep the small catch that was there in her voice under control—"do be good and don't pester Nicholas. Keep Deirdre good company tonight." She kissed him warmly on the cheek, looked longer into his face than a mere evening in Adrigole warranted, and turned from him abruptly. I could see a slight shiver go through her frame of a sudden, and as if in response to it, she turned again toward her younger brother. "Owen, I do love you so, however much I chide you. You do know that, don't you?"

"I know, Bessie, love," he answered softly.

They smiled at each other, and as she turned at last and left us, I could see that once more a tiny shiver had gone through her slim figure. Owen's arm, pressed against my own as we watched her walk from us, gave a similar shudder. I looked up at him sharply and saw that his face had gone quite suddenly white. I took his hand in mine and felt that it was as cold as ice.

"Poor Bess," he whispered. "I guess she is sweet on the captain. See how well she's tryin' ta bear up under his sailin' tonight." He turned and patted my hand and forced a smile. I didn't believe him for a minute. Something else had crossed his mind. "It'd be nice if he really was a decent chap after all, and I'm all wrong about him and his usin' her for cover. Yes, maybe he's a good sort after all. Always seemed ta be, ya know." He smiled again in that same forced way and allowed me to lead him like a child away from the direction of the house toward the red-roofed bell tower. Behind us, Lady Elizabeth's heavily laden coach rumbled away from the courtyard and out onto the roadway, bound for Adrigole and China across the seas.

Later that evening, in the deepening purple twilight, Owen and I stood on the portico, leaning against the balustrade, and watched the lights of the *Pride o' Bantry* disappear into the darkening sea over the long crest of Bere Island. Lady Elizabeth and her captain had finally, after thirty-odd years, made good their escape from Moondragon.

It was very late that evening, long after dinner, long after Owen and I watched the *Bantry* sail into the night, that Sir Nicholas arrived back at the house.

I was just leaving the parlor and crossing the hall toward the stairs when he came in, swirling a light cape off his shoulders and into the waiting hands of a manservant. It amused me that he should, regardless of having seen the servant's extended hands, toss the cape in such a presumptuous manner. Suppose no hand had come forth to take it? But for Sir Nicholas, there was no such supposition possible. There had always been a hand ready to catch his castings-off; there always would be such a hand, for was he not Sir Nicholas Cheng? That small, unconscious gesture on his part spoke so much to my reflective mind that I could but smirk sardonically to myself as I watched his entrance from the foot of the staircase.

He caught sight of me just then, and his own thoughtful gaze was arrested, a blank expression crossed his face, immediately replaced by a knowing smirk of his own.

"You've heard, then?" he stated flatly. "And I suppose you think it all very amusing?"

"Have you heard?" I countered in a startled tone, and then checked myself at once. It dawned that while I had Lady Elizabeth's departure on my mind, Sir Nicholas himself still dwelt upon that of Miss Paget and her brother. We were talk-

ing at cross-purposes, each having misinterpreted the reason for the other's sardonic expression. I felt vulnerable enough now in this household, without my hostess's protective presence, being at once the guardian of her secret flight and personally besieged by strange happenings of my own—mysterious rings, ghosts, nightmares, and odd flashes of clairvoyant insight—not to wish to complicate my life further by having any more misunderstanding and animosity grow up between the master of the house and myself.

"Forgive me, Sir Nicholas. We seem to speak at cross-purposes. *I have* heard of the Pagets' departure and know something of its cause. I have only sympathy for you. This must be a painful time for you, and I assure you that I do *not* find any amusement in it."

"No?" he snapped. "Your face as I came in seemed to say otherwise."

"Did it indeed?" Presumptuous bastard, I thought to myself. "Shall I endeavor to describe the train of my thoughts as I watched you enter this hall? Perhaps I should! It might amuse and distract as well as enlighten. But whether you wish me to or not, I do solemnly assure you, sir, that no thought of the Pagets or your own discomfiture in regard to them had entered my mind. I do not find amusement in the misfortunes of others, any more than I do in my own. Life is far too short for me to wish anyone anything but what is in his own best interests. If it is to your best interest to love the Honorable Miss Paget, I wish you well of her, Sir Nicholas. If, on the other hand, it is to your own best interests never to set eyes on her again, I can wish you that too, with quite equal heartiness."

I turned and began to mount the stairs. "I bid you good night, Sir Nicholas." I added this last softly and as an after-thought, hoping to mitigate some of the sharpness of my remarks. I could never seem to be as civil to the man as I ought.

"Miss Fennora," he called after me. I turned and looked down upon him standing alone and rather desperate of eye at the foot of the stairs. There was an odd, poignant twist to the line of his mouth and a look about him that was almost of supplication. It vanished in a second, but his voice, harsh and not in perfect control, belied the haughty demeanor that he now put on like a cloak or—more to the point—a mask. "I am about to have a sherry in the parlor and might want com-

pany. Will you join me, or are you engaged to spend the rest of the evening with my brother?"

"Your mother left word," I stated, having a care to follow Lady Elizabeth's plan to the letter and thus avoid a direct lie in her son's face, "that she had a headache and did not wish to be disturbed. Having no companion this evening, I was merely going to retire early."

"Will you join me, then?"

"By all means, I should be happy to." I turned, descended the stairs, and took his arm, which was offered with the same air of great ceremony that is so common between the wary parties to an armed truce. We were both making an effort to be civilized and courteous, perhaps because we each sensed that the other was laboring under a great strain to maintain control of himself, and neither of us wished to upset the fine emotional balance of the other or in any way be the one to cause new hostilities to break out between ourselves. At any rate, we actually crossed the wide hall and entered the parlor together without incident. He led me to a comfortably upholstered but massively carved sofa, roiling, like the staircase I had just left, with coils of scaled and beclawed dragons. He then walked, catlike and outwardly calm, to the bell pull by the fireplace, and, after giving it a brace of good smart jerks, paced, still with seeming calm, to a thronelike dragon-carved armchair opposite me, dropping back into it with a sigh. He passed a hand across his closed eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. The muscles at his temples throbbed convulsively, and I could see that his left hand, which rested on the broad head of a dragon that formed the arm of his chair, trembled slightly.

A servant entered, received a rapid order in Chinese, and left without a word.

"I think you have not slept in some time, Sir Nicholas," I said softly and with some guarded sympathy.

"No, I have not," he replied, and lapsed into silence. Still the muscles in his temples throbbed as he sat, head thrown back and eyes closed.

There was nothing I could say to him. Nothing in our previous relationship gave me leave to speak to him of the obvious personal agony under which he labored. We had exchanged no confidences or established any sympathetic rapport to warrant my offering him advice or philosophy or comfort. In fact, to have been soft with him at that moment might have upset the careful balance of our truce and sent

him raging at me like the wounded lion he was, the thorn in his paw more painful and less possible to remove than ever. It was best I sit there, awkward and helpless as I felt, and simply provide the questionable comfort that my mere presence afforded. Still those muscles throbbed convulsively, and my fingers twitched impatiently to lay hands on him, to soothe his aching head and give the consolation that he so badly needed. Owen, under similar circumstances, would have lapped up my attention like a kitten and greedily asked for more, putting on an even greater air of sorrow for the benefit of being further doted upon. This man, too proud, too haughty for his own good, needed more, and because he asked nothing, would indeed have been ashamed to ask for *anything*, received, as his portion, *nothing*.

The servant returned with a decanter, two glasses, and some biscuits. Sir Nicholas spoke again in Chinese, and the fellow, after setting the tray down on a table next to his master, left at once. The decanter and glasses remained untouched beside him.

Sir Nicholas sighed and opened his black eyes, blinking them wide open and staring at some unseen point in the far corner of the room. "My head throbs so," he remarked, and after making a small tentative gesture toward the decanter, sank back against the chair.

"The wine will make it worse," I remarked softly.

"Oh? Yes, I suppose so. But what will make it better?"

"My father," I lied, "was subject to such attacks as you are having now. There was only one cure."

"And that was . . .?"

"A simple light massage of the temples and brow." I spoke as impersonally as possible. "It restores the circulation and . . ." I was trying to be as technical as possible. To offer comfort in the guise of a practitioner experienced in the matter of headaches might work. As a woman sympathetically comforting the pains of an aching heart, I should have been defenestrated for certain.

"Will you try?" he leaned forward and asked urgently, breaking in upon my learned dissertation. "I am really quite desperate." For a headache cure, I wondered, or simply for a human's touch?

"I should be only too happy to help," I murmured with an air of objective severity in my tone, and rose from the sofa at once. Settling myself on the wide arm of his chair, I pushed him gently back against the upholstery, and placing my hands

to either side of his head, slid my fingers back through his straight, thick black hair. I could feel my long nails slide along the warmth of his skin till my thumbs reached his hot, pulsing temples; I began a soothing massage. I hoped I was being both gentle and effective, for I had never done such a service for a man in my life. My father had never been subject to headaches, his weakness being a touchy stomach, for which only his doctor had a cure. But evidently my instincts were quite correct in Sir Nicholas' case, for he closed his eyes and settled back into the chair, relaxing visibly under my ministrations. After a while he leaned his head to one side with the effect of pinning the tips of my fingers between his head and the upholstery. Clearly he wanted me to keep up the effort of massaging his temple with my free thumb. With my other hand I stroked his brow, ran my fingers through his hair, and smiled to myself with a certain quiet pride. The big ranting cat with the thorn in his paw was purring under the soothing caress of my own sharp claws. His face gradually began to relax, the brow unfurrowing, the mouth becoming less grim. The expression of pain softened into one of sleepiness, and I sensed that in a few minutes he would indeed be asleep. Then I should steal away, inform Shi Fu of his master's whereabouts, and let that faithful servant decide if he would let him slumber on undisturbed where he was or rouse him to retire on his bed. But, alas, this idyllic end to our first noncombative encounter was not to be! I heard a click and saw from over the back of the chair that the parlor door had opened slightly. Of a sudden it flew wide open, banging resoundingly into the cabinet beside it. Owen stormed into the room.

"What the devil is going on here?" he roared, at once rousing his nephew from his near-slumber and myself from the tender reveries in which I had been lost.

As Sir Nicholas started awake, he rose instinctively from his seat, thus upsetting the delicate balance that had enabled me to sit upon the arm of it. Over we went, myself on top of the small table on which the manservant had deposited the tray, Sir Nicholas on top of me, and the great carved armchair on top of us both. The decanter decanted, sending a cascade of sticky brown sherry across the carpet, and the crystal glasses, tinkling merrily as chimes, rolling after it. Sir Nicholas and I found ourselves thrust into the most intimate and embarrassing contact with each other while imprisoned quite effectively, if only momentarily, by the immense weight of the heavy carved chair that pinned us to the floor.

Owen stood above us surveying the scene with rich, humorous enjoyment. I could tell this by his voice alone, for the only view that I had of him from my helpless position on the carpet was that of his disgracefully dusty, cobwebby boots as he tapped one toe severely upon the floor, incidentally grinding scattered biscuits into the Chinese carpet.

"Well, ain't this rich! My trusted fiancée"—and here I could detect the "wink" in his voice, meant for my ears alone—"and me own beloved 'nephoo'"—again an indication of his lack of serious intent—"cavortin' like a pair o' low costermongers in the back alleys o' London. For shame on ya both. I'll see *you* in the mornin', Nicholas, me lad. We've got somethin' ta settle." Then off he went, hooting derisively and laughing a great horselaugh that echoed through the hall beyond, even after he had slammed the door behind him.

Just as we were struggling to extricate ourselves from the wreckage, the door opened again. "By the way," Owen called. "It's quite all right. I'll leave you two young people ta whatever it was ya were doin' before I made my untimely intrusion."

He roared again, and as he closed the door for the last time, Sir Nicholas, having regained some of his composure, if not his footing called after him, "Owen, you bastard, I'll get you for this."

Owen only laughed the louder as he went off upon his merry way.

Actually, I thought, the evening could not have ended in better fashion. We had been caught out by Owen and made to look ridiculous together. Disaster! one might think. But no, not at all, for we had laughed at ourselves heartily and in concert.

In his laughter Sir Nicholas found some release from his brooding concern over Miss Paget's defection and some understanding of the playful and harmlessly mischievous relationship that actually existed between his uncle and me. In fact, the incident gave me leave to explain how the scene that he had intruded upon the night of the ball had come about in the first place, and how his wicked assumption had placed me in the unwilling position of fiancée to Owen Sarsfield-Jones. What I could never had explained in the cold light of day on a hard sofa came so easily to me sitting upon a sticky, sherry-coated carpet in the candlelit parlor that I marveled to

think that I had ever wondered how I would get out of my predicament.

Nicholas sat across the carpet from me, absently stacking biscuits into a fortress along the geometric pattern of the rug. "And it all came about as innocently as that! As innocently as did our own embarrassing position!" he remarked, laughing lightly—not in a merry, abandoned way perhaps, but laughing nevertheless. His headache seemed to have vanished.

"Exactly so," I agreed, keeping to myself—my own guilty secret—that if anything, there had been far more innocence to my tumble in the champagne with Owen than there was in the position in which he had found Sir Nicholas and me sitting together upon the dragon chair.

We left the mess as it was and crossed the hall to the stairs, still in a lighthearted mood. He bade me a pleasant good night at my sitting-room door, and after casting a glance in the direction of his mother's unlighted rooms, went on toward his own apartment. Owen's lights I could see, were still on, and I half-expected him to come and join me for a last laugh at his little prank. Therefore I made no attempt to ready myself for bed, but kept to my sitting room for a while with book in hand, awaiting a light tap on my portico doors. It never came.

Something awoke me from my doze. I started and saw that I still sat in the corner of my sofa, the little leatherbound book open upon its face in my lap. The clock on the chinoiserie desk between the portico doors struck once. It was twelve-thirty in the morning.

I looked about me, blinking. All was familiar, though very dim and somber-looking, for the lamp had burned low. A chill went through me, but not because of the damp night mists that came in from off the bay; I was well protected from them by a fine woolen shawl. No, there was something else: some presentiment of imminent happenings lurked in the atmosphere of the room like a palpable presence. I might almost have glanced over my shoulder and found it hovering behind me in the shadows. And so I sat, composing myself as one who sits for a portrait, and waited with an odd, detached feeling of nothingness. I had not long to wait.

The sound vibrated through the room like nothing that I had never heard before in a waking state. Yet, dreaming, I had heard it before and knew it for what it was—the slow, solemn pealing of a great brazen bell; not the sound of such a bell as rang from every steeple in the British Isles, but

rather the inexorable knell of such a bell as might crack open the earth and reveal the stinking bowels wherein demons pranced and lost souls burned forever in their agony.

I waited, expecting the dreadful din to end momentarily, but still it went on, heavy brazen knell upon knell, as if the sound would never end until the very stones of Moondragon itself had cracked with it. Finally I could stand no more. I lit a candle, and wrapping my shawl closer about my shoulders, stepped out onto the portico. Taking care to protect the flame from the slightly stirring breeze, I made my way slowly along the facade of the house; all the while, the great solemn bell continued to toll, reverberating from the stones of the walls, from the tiles of the roof, from the very brain within my skull.

As I approached the corner and was about to pass Sir Nicholas' rooms, he flung open his doors and came out onto the portico, fully dressed and with a dark lantern in his hand.

"Miss Fennora," he cried, with the wild harried look of a suddenly awakened sleeper, "you had not yet retired either."

"No, Sir Nicholas, I was dozing, but something awoke me."

"The bell," he said.

"No," I answered. "A presentiment. I *knew* something was about to happen. I just didn't know what. Then it began to toll. Will it never stop?" There was now an air of desperation in my voice that I could not control. As he continued speaking, I could detect the same note in his own voice.

"It seems not. God help me, I don't know what it means, but that bell has not been rung since before I was born: it has not rung since my father died."

We rounded the side of the house with Sir Nicholas a few feet in the lead, and both nearly reeled back under the almost physical impact of that inexorable knell. The sound, shielded as it had been by the massive bulk of the house, which stood between us and the tower, was bad enough, but now we received the full force of it as we neared the garden, and it became a nightmare indeed.

Ahead of us, toward the far end of the portico, a broad swath of light cut across the darkness, streaming from the wide-flung doors of Owen's lair.

"He must have been awake and come out ahead of us," Sir Nicholas called to me, raising his voice to make himself heard over the endless din that filled the air. "Owen," he

shouted into the room as he passed it. "No, not there," he called back to me. "He must be in the garden already."

In the garden or beyond, I thought to myself for no particular reason. Then something caught my eye across the flag-stone floor of the walkway, something that twinkled like the eye of an idol from just without the stream of light that issued forth from Owen's empty room.

I reached down to pick up the ring, knowing it to be that which had been upon my finger on the morning of this fateful day just passing, and since then in Owen's side jacket pocket.

An electric shock went through me as I touched it; I drew back, leaving it where it lay, knowing in an instant more than I had wished to know, knowing more than I would ever be able to forget!

"Owen," I whispered. "Owen," I cried, and regardless of the fluttering and dying of the candle in my hand, I ran on toward the single beam of Sir Nicholas' dark lantern at the top of the garden stairs.

"Owen," he was shouting over the unending knell of that dreadful brazen gong, calling out into the blackness of the long Chinese garden.

"Owen," I cried, my voice sounding frail and shrill on that booming, vibrating night air. I came up beside Sir Nicholas and clutched at his arm, holding on for my life.

"I've been calling and calling," he shouted over the constant din of the bell. "Where in God's name has he got to?" There was all the while that dreadful edge of desperation in his voice.

"Owen," I whimpered into the rough cloth of Sir Nicholas' jacket, pressing my head into his shoulder in a vain effort to blot out the image that had seared itself into my brain with the first touch of that hellish ring. I knew where Owen had got to. I knew why he could not hear us call his name.

The Longest Night

... as a sullen bell,
Remember'd knolling a departed friend.
—Shakespeare

We walked down the garden stairs together by the long pale beam of the lantern, Sir Nicholas slightly in the lead, I hovering at his elbow with my shawl wrapped around me like a shield to protect me from what I knew lay ahead. The candlestick, I still held tight in my grasp, useless though it was without a flame. My knuckles must have been white with the convulsiveness of my grip, for I held onto it—as one holds onto one's life—with all the strength I had.

Then, all at once, over the never-ending sound of that blasted bell, came a rushing and shuffling and strange, persistent murmuring; the bushes and shrubs all about us seemed to come alive. "Fear not till Birnan wood do come to Dunsinane," ran the desperate thought in my mind. The world seemed to be going mad, summoned to its frenzy by the incessant gonging of that great brazen bell in the tower ahead of us. I turned, shrinking into Nicholas' shoulder, and saw that all about us the garden was trembling with subtle movement. Small flickers of light appeared, the murmur of strange tongues carried to my ears like the whisper of waves heard below the constant booming of thunder at sea; faces began to appear, dimly seen by the light of candles and lanterns and flickering torches. Faces, yellow or nut brown from the sun; faces, pale as cheese; faces, ruddy with exertion—all with sleepy eyes thrown wide open by sudden wakefulness and wonder. The servants and farmers and tenants of Moon-dragon gathered themselves within the precincts of the

garden, summoned as were Sir Nicholas and I by the nightmare knelling of that great brazen bell.

Above them all, towering over that nameless, whispering throng by the very power and majesty of her presence almost more than by virtue of her statuelike stance of the portico high above us all, stood the imperious Mrs. Ling, the only unmoving figure in the dreadful scene.

She stood, as implacable in her way to my sight as was the sound of that bell to my ear, with a lantern raised above her head that threw one-half of her face into shadow, the other into perfect focus, the blackness of her eyepatch giving her ivory features the look of a skull with a deep, hollow, empty socket where the eye should have been. I cringed involuntarily and turned away, still clinging to Sir Nicholas' arm as he stealthily approached the tower.

All about us, the servants and tenants of Moondragon stopped their whispering approach, content to watch as the master of the house moved on alone toward that damned hellish bell that never ceased its nightmare din. Then a beam of light, as strong as that of Sir Nicholas' own lantern, shone upon the ground of my right. Looking up, I saw—and was grateful—that Shi Fu had joined us. He uttered something in Chinese to his master, and Sir Nicholas nodded. The tall manservant touched my arm lightly.

"Please, miss, go back."

I shook my head and straightened my posture defiantly. He was being kind, trying to protect me. He must have thought, I realized, coming out of my dazed reverie, that there was danger for us, that we had aught to fear from what was in the tower. I knew, of course, that there was no danger, nothing to fear at all. What had caused the terror in my eye, the aspect of trepidation in my posture, was not fear of what lay ahead, but rather the impression made upon me by the sights and dreadful sounds about me in the nighted garden. Only I—and one unknown other, perhaps—knew surely that there was nothing at all to fear from what was in the bell tower except the sight itself of what lay within.

"Deirdre, go back," Sir Nicholas ordered urgently to me over his left shoulder. We had stopped our stealthy approach and stood at the foot of the small flight of stairs that led to its open, doorless granite portal. The sound of the bell was more dreadful than ever, deafening and brutal, each peal an unbearable assault upon the senses.

And then it stopped. And the stopping was almost as terrible as the knelling had been.

The silence stunned us for a moment, as effectively as a blow would have done, but then the three of us—almost as one—ran up the steps and into the tower. *Owen was there.*

He lay, crumpled like a broken, disjointed marionette, upon his stomach. One long slender leg was drawn up, the other extended to its full length. Both his arms were slightly raised at the elbow, his fingers curled and convulsed, as if he had clawed at the very flags of the floor in his last extremity. His face lay upon one cheek, so that he looked at us with open, staring, surprised eyes and a snarl upon his lips that bared his clenched white teeth. A trickle of dark, already congealing blood formed a tiny pool by the corner of his mouth.

The hilt and part of a long dark green blade rose above his back like a signal flag, declaring the means by which he had been done to his death. Had he worn his uniform on that night, as he had on the night of the ball, he would have looked every bit the part of a heroic soldier taken in the midst of battle by some exotic oriental instrument of war.

As it was now, in his dirty boots and dusty woolen jacket, I alone knew that he had died no less a hero for all his lack of uniform. He had done what he set out to do. It was not his fault that he had died of the doing, that someone one step behind him all the way had deprived him of his crowing and of his triumph.

I looked down at his body, so pathetic in the pale, distorted yellow light of the two lanterns, and suddenly my eyes, which had been dry till then, welled with tears. I did not cry, but only murmured—the only sound in the utter silence of that dark and deadly tower—“It’s just not fair. It wasn’t supposed to end like this, Monsieur Dupin.”

I sat, numb and unfeeling, in the little side chair that Owen had cleared for me in the debris of his lair just the very night before. Sir Nicholas stood squarely in front of me, a tumbler of neat whiskey thrust at me like a threat. I stared at it with unseeing eyes.

“Drink this, Deirdre. You’re holding up well, but I think the liquor will help.”

I took the glass from his hand, still with unblinking, unmoving eyes. I held it but did not drink, nor did he from his

own untouched tumbler. Rather, he picked his way through the chaos of the room to find a seat. As he did so, I surveyed the scene that only the previous evening I had found so amusing. Owen's den was no longer funny, but pathetic rather, with an air of lifelessness about it. No longer would the tall, slender, boyishly enthusiastic denizen of this lair stretch his long, bootshod legs over the piles of books and papers, looking for the last dregs in an empty sherry decanter or browsing amidst the port bottles for a rind of cheese or stray biscuit. The tobacco would grow stale and old in its humidors, the ashes never more overflow their various ashtrays, the pipes remain cold where they lay. The life and light had gone out of that room, and though I had spent but a few fleeting hours within its walls, I lamented its death with almost the same numb sorrow that I mourned the loss of its owner, that jovial and mischievous rogue whose corpse even now lay lifeless and stiffening on the counterpane in his bedroom next door.

Sir Nicholas sat, still shaken himself, in the oak throne chair in the corner and brooded over his whiskey.

"This is Moondragon business," he had said in a cold voice of command. "Not a word is to be said outside these walls. If one man outside the gates of the estate hears of this, woe to the one who has spoken. I rely upon your honor to keep your people in check. Have I your word on this?"

And a dozen men had nodded, acquiescing in their several tongues—Chinese, Gaelic, and English. Sir Nicholas Cheng was their master, their *seigneur*, and they would obey. By the strange eerie light of torch and lantern, it had been a dramatic and affecting scene that had taken place in the garden—like something out of the lost age when men owed their first loyalty to their liege lord, and that lord owed fealty to no man. Once more, watching Sir Nicholas Cheng standing before the tower, the body of his slain kinsman behind him in the darkness, I had been reminded of the blood that flowed in his veins—the blood of emperors, the blood of pirates—imperious autocrats all, men of action and power, destined by their very natures to be sovereigns, whether it be of a nation, a ship, an estate, or a family. And then, like the melancholy last scene of *Hamlet*, we followed behind as Owen's body, lifted on the shoulders of a troop of small, wiry, oriental servitors, was carried in mournful state up the stairs and onto the portico. Mrs. Ling, a single stain of sorrow trickling down her ivory cheek, held high the lantern in

her hand and lit 'our way, like some strange earthbound goddess, to his chamber. Once I had turned and looked out over the thronged garden, making out here and there the sorrowful, solemn faces of house servants and stablehands who were known to me and more especially to Owen. He had been liked by all, loved by some, wished no harm by any. I wondered who, in that mass of people below me, might have done the deed; who dissembled his sorrow so well that no man was able to cry out "Here! Here is the villain who has done the deed!" But no man spoke, and every man's face was a mask of grief.

Such were my reveries as Nicholas and I sat silent and moody in the room that had been Owen's. It was a long time before either of us spoke. Then, finally, I shifted in my seat, and the sound of my motion seemed to rouse him last.

His brow knit thoughtfully, the characteristic spots of color appeared across his broad cheekbones, betokening some strong emotion within—anger, most likely—and, looking up at me with great intensity in his long, wide, depthless black eyes, he finally spoke.

"It's time, isn't it, that you told me just what has been going on here?"

"Whatever do you mean?" I shifted again, knowing by his quiet deadly tone that this was going to be a very unpleasant conversation.

"I mean, Miss Fennora, that you knew before you saw his body that Owen was dead; that you know why he is dead; and—perhaps of even greater import to me at the moment—you know exactly why every living soul in Moondragon was roused from his slumbers by that damnable bell with the exception of my mother and her maid, Kathleen. Where, in God's name, Deirdre, has my mother been through all this nightmare?"

I paused to collect my thoughts and frame my answer carefully. "You weren't to know until tomorrow, when Lady Elizabeth's letter was to be delivered to you, but under the circumstances, I shall have to tell you now. Please, Sir Nicholas, let me assure you first of all that your mother is quite safe and, I am happy to say, well away from this terrible situation."

"Well away?" His eyes flashed hotly, and his voice was loud.

"Indeed, sir," I retorted, letting my own temper rise in de-

fense. "She booked passage on the *Pride o' Bantry* and is even now on the open sea, headed toward China."

"My mother is aboard the *Bantry*? That's impossible! The ship booked no passengers. I saw no sign of her aboard when I was inspecting the crew. . . ."

"She boarded from a longboat that fetched her from the inlet over Adrigole way."

"How could she have arranged all this without my knowledge? Captain Vreeland" He broke off and thought for a moment. I could see the pieces falling into place in his mind. "Damn his eyes! Captain Vreeland! She's . . . she's . . ."

"She has sailed for China on the *Cheng* ship, *Pride o' Bantry*, in company with her maid and companion, Kathleen, under the protection of your loyal employee Captain Isaac Vreeland," I stated firmly and precisely. I had no intention of letting Sir Nicholas think the worst of his own mother or of the man who, barring the unforeseen, would soon be his stepfather. I steered us off this dangerous topic at once, for had he suspected that a marriage was intended, he would have moved heaven and earth to prevent it. I went on headlong and fiercely just to divert him. "Under what better, more reassuring circumstances could she have chosen to undertake such a voyage? If the secrecy of the endeavor unsettles you, ask yourself this. Did she have any other choice than to flee like a thief in the night? Would you have let her go, had you known that she wished to sail with the *Bantry*? Are you the kind of son, the kind of man, for that matter, who would have understood and given your blessing, or are you, rather, so caught up in your own endeavors and dreams that you have no tolerance of anyone else? Would you not, too, have preferred to keep her chained here for another thirty years, as she has been for the last, catering to your every selfish whim? What choice had she but to flee in the night?"

"You've quite a tongue in your head, haven't you, woman?"

"If I have, *man*, it must be speaking with wisdom and truth, for it hasn't yet cleaved to the roof of my mouth—as you may have noticed."

He eyed me darkly for a moment. Then a devious look stole over his face. "We've got to fetch her back," he said. Clearly the night's terrible event could be turned to good account. "She's going to take Owen's death very hard. My uncle in the north will have to be notified, but he won't even care

enough about his brother to come for the funeral. He's never set foot in Moondragon, and he can rot where he is for all I care, but Mother will—"

"Your mother mustn't even be told. You can send word to Captain Vreeland and instruct him to use his own discretion in choosing the best time to tell her. Sometime after they've gone through the canal, as far as I'm concerned," I added indifferently, knowing that Lady Elizabeth would be Mrs. Vreeland by that time and would have the comfort of a loving husband in her sorrow. Moreover, once through the Suez Canal, there was no suitable port from which she might return to the West, even if she so wished. I was hell-bent on seeing her happy. Even Owen's death, awful as it was, would not prevent her being with her gallant Dutchman if I could help it. "Why," I pursued, "when there is nothing to be done save bury him, burden her with such intelligence? The *Bantry* can't return, and the only thing that you'd be accomplishing would be to give her heartbreakin news—news which can wait, after all—at what should be a very happy, carefree time in her life. She might, it's true, break her voyage at Marseilles or some such port and journey back overland to us alone—but for what purpose? To stand by his grave and lament? She can do that in a few months' time just as well." I rose from my chair and approached him carefully, mindful of the possibility that I might twist my ankle over something on the floor at any minute. I knelt upon a hassock at his feet, and putting a hand upon his arm, pleaded softly. "Cannot you see, Sir Nicholas, that I am right in this? Pray do not send word of this to your mother. Grant her a few happy, carefree months after all her years of devotion and service to you and her poor brother. Why, Owen himself, if he could, would probably put in a 'Come on, old man, be a sport.' "

He looked down upon my hand, rather small and white against the dark, rough cloth of the jacket that clothed his broad, strong forearm. A strange crumpled twist came to the corner of his mouth—whether smile or not, I could not tell—and then he nodded almost wearily. "I'll think it over," he said, a defensively gruff finality in his tone that told me, almost more than words would have done, that I had won. Lady Elizabeth would be spared the news of her brother's death for a time at least.

I started to rise, intending to go back to my own chair. I was no longer numb from the terrors of the garden and tower, and somehow that tumbler of whiskey began to ap-

peal. Instead, however, I found my hand clamped tightly in place on his arm by his own strong right hand, the thumb and forefinger of which were locked around my wrist with great force.

"You haven't yet told me why Owen is dead." His voice had a cold edge to it that at once frightened and excited me.

"My poor bloodless hand cannot tell you, Sir Nicholas, and my voice, which can, may be heard quite well from across the room." I pulled away from his grasp and stood before him. "Moreover, I am now sufficiently in need of that whiskey that you gave me, to venture back across this debris-strewn floor to fetch it."

"You can have mine," he answered, and taking me by the waist with his two hands, dragged me into a sitting position on the hassock at his feet by main force. I found myself, too startled to be indignant, seated upon the footstool with my knees drawn up and my skirt a rumpled mess about me. Thank heavens, I thought, the fashion was for bustles and not the hoop skirts of my mother's day, or I should have been in an even more ridiculous position than that in which I already found myself. Before I could protest his peremptory treatment of my person, he literally shoved his glass into my hand. "Drink up and go on. Why is Owen dead?"

"I cannot, of course, tell you precisely. I don't know who killed him, though I can certainly tell you who did not. But as to why, it's all because of you and your damned treasure and your Honorable Miss Paget." Here he winced involuntarily, and I, as much out of caution for myself as out of pity for him, toned down the heat of my words. "Owen set about finding the secret of the whereabouts of the Cheng treasure. He's . . . he was clever, and he was trying like E. A. Poe's detective—"

"That's what you meant in the tower when you said, 'It wasn't supposed to end like this, Monsieur Dupin.'"

"Yes, precisely. He was trying to find the secret by means of clues and deductions. He was also trying to find out the identity of the eavesdropper who listened in on our conversation in your mother's room that night. He was sure someone was trying to hear what we had to say about the treasure."

"What utter nonsense!"

"Nonsense indeed! He found your damned treasure for you, you ingrate, and died for his pains."

"Oh, he found it for me, did he? Then why am I not even now with my mother aboard the *Bantry* with Owen's map

and instructions in my hands, bound for wherever in China it was that my ancestors hid the hoard?" he sneered.

"There was hardly time," I remarked evasively. "I suspect that he finally got all his clues together only this very night. In fact, he must have been looking for you to tell you earlier this evening when he stumbled upon us in the parlor. Poor fellow! How very like him to prefer a good joke to the revelation of his secret. He thought he had all the time in the world. Remember? Having played his little prank on us—turning the tables literally as well as figuratively—he said to you, 'I'll see you in the morning, Nicholas, me lad. We've got somethin' ta settle.' At the time, even I thought he was just being funny, but no! That remark was made in all seriousness, though by his tone he seemed to be jesting. He was in such high good spirits because he had finally puzzled out the secret. I thought he was boasting when he claimed he'd practically found it this morning in your . . ." Here I broke off abruptly, not wanting to call attention to Owen's assault on the library mantel. Since Sir Nicholas had evidently not noticed it as yet, I did not wish to bring the subject up at this time. "I realized what had happened at once when I saw his body in the tower. It was then that the true import of his words came home to me."

"All right. I'll accept your interpretation, as far as it goes, for the moment. But why was he suddenly so interested in the treasure? Was he planning to steal it for himself, or just blackmail me into buying the secret of its whereabouts from him for a small fortune?"

"Neither, you bloody bastard!" I flared up indignantly. "He intended to tell you where it was and earn for himself a decent and well-deserved finder's fee. The which, I might add, would have been only right. After all, what have your years of searching accomplished? Absolutely nothing, I believe!"

"And what," he retorted angrily, "has his death accomplished? The treasure, if he did figure out where it is, is still as lost as ever, if the secret died with him! And I have only his word—never terribly reliable at best—boasted to you this morning, as you say, and your intuition, that he actually did learn where it is. Just what good are any of these 'ifs' and 'supposes' to me?"

Now I was really angry. "Doesn't it strike you as rather crude and callous to be sitting here arguing over a mere treasure when Owen is lying cold and dead in the next room?"

"And doesn't it strike you that unless I find the secret of the treasure myself, as you claim Owen did, and in a hurry, too, that I have no way of finding the cold-blooded swine who knifed my uncle in the back like a coward? Find the secret Owen found, and I find his murderer. I admit that there was no great love between us, Deirdre, but we were kinsmen. He was harmless enough in his useless way, never hurt anyone—intentionally, at least. As Shakespeare would say, there was no offense in the man, no offense in the world. For such reasons, therefore, and perhaps others, it galls me that he *is* lying in there." He thrust his arm out, gesturing dramatically at the closed door to the bedroom. "But he *is* lying in there, Deirdre, not merely 'cold and dead,' as you say, but rather cold and *murdered*. Nobody murders one of mine with impunity. Not while I'm a Cheng and master of Moon-dragon."

"So you *will* avenge him?"

"Does that surprise you?" he asked quietly, as if almost hurt by the question.

"No, I suppose not," I answered. "It just seemed to me that it would be all up to me. That I would be the one to avenge him."

"You?"

"Of course. I didn't really think that you'd care at all. I thought that the law would probably follow its plodding course and never find a clue; that the vengeance, therefore, would be mine alone to seek out and exact. The moment that I knew he was dead, I knew that it was my duty to do so—almost as an . . . an atonement."

"First of all, I do care. Second, you're a woman. What could you do? Third—and I've asked this before. You knew he was dead before you ever saw his body in the tower. In God's name, how?"

"I was helping Owen with his deductions—acting as a sounding board for his ideas, really—and though I may not have given any concrete aid, he claimed to be greatly helped by certain incidents that I had experienced and related to him."

"Incidents?" He leaned forward toward me, his curiosity piqued.

"Dreams, nightmares, sightings," I rattled off matter-of-factly, a bit embarrassed to speak of such things before such a man. I was sure I could expect an adverse reaction.

"What nonsense are you babbling now, woman? Have you had too much neat whiskey, or what?"

"I am not intoxicated. I am clairvoyant," I retorted indignantly.

"Oh, lord, save me from gypsies and washerwomen born with cauls; from village witches and girls with the sight. Bless your Black Irish heart, you're clairvoyant, are ye, lass? Tell me, what is it ye see, now? Fairies dancin' in the moonlight of a summer's eve? Or is it ya hear the wail o' the banshee on foine noights like this when family members is done ta their deaths?"

I sat stunned for a moment, not by his words so much as by the way he said them, in that mocking brogue, so very broad and unexpected from one of such cultured speech habits as Sir Nicholas Cheng. It gave me much to think about. Another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"We have nothing more to say to each other, Sir Nicholas; at least, not for the rest of this dreadful night. I shall see you at breakfast perhaps, and then, if you are in a less sprightly mood by that time, we can discuss what is to be done to avenge your uncle and my dear friend. If finding the treasure for you is the only way to do it, then that is how it shall be done. In the meanwhile, I bid you a sad good night."

I left him speechless with anger or whatever emotion he was then harboring within him, and stepped out onto the darkened portico, careful to close the doors tightly behind me. It was almost completely dark, no light shining on that side of the house save that which came through the nearly closed louvers of Owen's doors, but it was enough. As I came out, I marked the object of my search winking in the light ahead of me, and I placed it well enough so that now, despite the lack of light, I was able to lay hands on it with only a little groping. As I had expected, I again experienced the same small shock, saw the same fleeting vision that had so affrighted me when I first touched the ring earlier that night, but it held no terrors for me now. I had seen the actuality of Owen's dead body, and no mere vision could compare with that. Carrying the little circle of gold gingerly in my hand, I hastened to my own rooms and hid it in among my own few pieces of jewelry on the simple theory that it is always best to hide apples among apples, and oranges among oranges.

By some miracle, I slept that night, deeply and restfully. Perhaps the gods were being kind. Perhaps they knew what

the day was to bring, and the long night that was yet to come.

I did not see Sir Nicholas at breakfast, for I slept late and chose to have a tray in my room rather than face the prospect of an encounter with him without adequate fortification in the way of strong tea and necessary nourishment. The day, as if mocking the feelings in my heart and the dreadful event of the night before, shone brightly under a particularly glorious sun. The air was limpid as a woodland pool and smelled of all the exotic blooms of Moondragon's lovely gardens, made even more heady by the warmth of the intense sunlight beating down upon their fragrant heads.

As I sat down to my breakfast by the open portico doors, a servant entered with my morning's post—one letter only, and that addressed in an unknown hand, elegant and rather affected in style, though leaning slightly more toward the masculine than not. I broke the seal with great curiosity and read the following:

Bantry Inn
Bantry
June 22, 1883

My dear Miss Fennora,

The haste of my departure from Moondragon this morning forbade my taking leave of you, for which I am not only deeply sorry on my account, but also most apologetic on yours.

I had hoped that during a more extended stay I should have had the delight of your company and the expectation of your friendship. Now, alas, both those pleasures must await some future time, when you are away from that house. Then, perhaps, I shall find my way to Dublin and you shall honor me by your company on a tour of its sights. It is a pleasure I look forward to, I can assure you.

There is not much time before our coach is ready for the journey to Cork, and so I must make haste. After much flogging of my wits, I have finally remembered the thing that was bothering me on our stroll in the garden during the ball—namely, why a Chinese woman with an eye patch should have seemed so familiar a sight to me. I had indeed seen such a person before, and though I realize now that the two are only superficially alike, it does seem unusual, as we agreed, that one should see in

one's lifetime *one* Chinese lady with an eyepatch. To have encountered two, and in the space of a single year, is remarkable indeed. The sight of the first was so unusual and impressed me so at the time that I cannot think why it should have slipped my mind at all. I can only put the lapse down to your distracting company—for the vivacity of your flashing eyes and glowing smile, contrasted by the poignant and somewhat aloof elegance of your rustling black silk mourning, was a pleasant distraction indeed. But to my story.

The Chinese woman of whom I spoke I saw in London last autumn. She was such an exotic and sensational creature that she turned all eyes in her direction as she made her way into a box at the theater—the Haymarket, if I remember. Her age I could not begin to guess, but she was rather tall and very slender, with what appeared to be quite an elegant figure, but what arrested all eyes was the flaming scarlet of her gown, one of the most elaborate Parisian creations you can imagine. She wore a severe and rather unfashionable style of coif—much like that of the woman Mrs. Ling—but dressed with iridescent black feathers and diamond clips. She wore a profusion, in fact, of brilliant white diamonds (which stood out upon the ivory-yellow of her skin in a most memorable way), long scarlet gloves, and—oddest of all—a scarlet eyepatch tied about her head with a scarlet ribbon that ended in a bow hung with diamond droplets. She caused, as you may imagine, a great sensation, of which she affected to take no notice whatsoever. She was obviously a woman of great presence, and her manner—*austere in the extreme*—formed a strange contrast to the gaudy splendor of her dress.

Her companion, on the other hand, was a nondescript white man of small stature. He came in behind her, and I could not make him out from where I sat, but they seemed, according to a friend who sat nearer, to be the most intimate acquaintances. My friend concluded, in fact, that she must be the mistress of the fellow, and he some wealthy and eccentric man with a taste for the exotic in his women.

It was just after this that I left for the continent, and so the whole incident slipped my mind, but I expect that if I inquire among my friends in London, I can learn

who they were. If I do, I shall let you know what I find out.

At any rate, that is the tale of my first Chinese lady with an eyepatch. The second, in her own national dress, waltzing on the parquet floors of Moondragon, was far less strange a sight than the first, though if I had not seen the lady in scarlet, I should think Mrs. Ling quite odd enough in her own right.

You, on the other hand, are no odd sight at all—simply a lovely one.

The coach arrives this moment, and so, farewell.

Yours faithfully,
Augustus Paget

I sat, trembling with emotions that I could not explain, visions as vivid as if I had seen them myself crossing and recrossing before my mind's eye, of the scarlet-clad Chinese woman in a box at the theater. Holding Augustus Paget's letter in my hand, I found that I could see her as well as if I had been beside him on that autumn night.

There had been the sound of instruments tuning up in the pit, the rustle of programs, and the incessant murmur of those already seated. Late arrivals were making their noisy entrance, and muffled bumps and scrapings could be heard from behind the curtains of the stage. Suddenly there had been a few audible gasps; eyes turned and widened with disbelief, ladies raised their fans to mask their shocked and disapproving gazes, while men stared frankly in amazement and admiration. Something in the exotic scarlet-clad, diamond-encrusted oriental woman entering her box in the circle excited and aroused their jaded natures, for she held promise of strange mysteries unknown in the pale Englishwomen that circumstances had forced them to marry. This, their eyes told them, was a rare creature indeed—bizarre and flamboyant and sensual; a mistress of *outré* and unusual pleasures hidden beneath the mask of cold oriental austerity that concealed her true nature from all save those initiate few who might read the truth in her one dark and fathomless eye. And every corpulent, jaded roué in the place envied the small, ruddy-faced, rotund nobleman beside her for his good fortune in having found her and for the wealth and title and prowess it took to keep her.

She herself sat, impervious to every gazing eye, with the majesty of an empress, secure in the power of her own mag-

netic attraction, secure in the ally who sat beside her, malevolent and useful, strong and sensual and manipulable in his egocentric pride and enmity. Yes, I could see it all as if I had been myself beside Augustus Paget on that mild autumn night in London.

The vision dissolved in a flash with the sound of knocking at my door. Sir Nicholas had sent Shi Fu to request my company in the library. Since the request was politely worded and borne by word of mouth rather than upon a card resting on a little jade lily pad, I chose to honor it and join him at once. I was, moreover, more keenly aware than ever that his treasure needed finding in all haste if Owen was to be properly avenged. With one brief detour to another part of the house, I made my way to Sir Nicholas' library.

He was standing before the fireplace when I entered, his gaze fixed upon the large, irregular, soot-free patch of granite bearing the doggerel rhyme composed by that first of all Irish Chengs, Cheng Ch'engkung.

"Owen's doing, I presume," he said, not bothering to look in my direction as I came in.

"Indeed it was! How he delighted in the mess he was making, poor fellow. I think he wanted to see you raise the roof in a typical Cheng tirade and then cool you down by revealing the secret of the treasure."

"Yes, that would be Owen's way, all right. You knew him pretty well, didn't you?" There was an edge to his voice that sounded like pique.

"It wasn't very difficult, once I got the hang of it. He wasn't really the libertine he pretended to be. Or, at least, he wouldn't have been if he had ever used his heart and brain to the full, as he should have done long ago."

Walking to the southern, better-lit end of the room, I sought out a stream of light and opened Owen's black ledger book, which I held in my hand. "I have brought something for you to peruse, Nicholas. Some of its contents I understand quite well. The rest would be better solved by two clever heads than one."

"What is it?" he asked, striding across the room eagerly.

"Owen was keeping notes—mostly in interrogatory form—of things that occurred to him as being pertinent to his 'investigation.' Some of them make a good deal of sense. Others, none at all. Read over them quickly and see what you make of them."

His nose was already buried in the book even as I spoke. He waved me to silence with an impatient gesture. "Sit down, Deirdre, and be comfortable. I'll scan this for a while."

"Of course, Nicholas," I answered, and settled into a chair opposite his desk.

At first he paced to and fro, his brows alternately knit and raised in surprise as he read Owen's material to himself from the ledger. Once he smiled at something he read, and then, after puzzling over something else for a while, he looked up with a good-natured grin and said to me, "Abominable handwriting the poor devil had, but a surprisingly sound brain, even after the abuses he submitted it to. Certainly had a keen sense of observation and detail. Of course, he was almost totally wrong-headed."

"I know. Couldn't see the forest for the trees, so to speak." I actually had other things in mind than those wrong clues of Owen's in the ledger, however, even as I said this. Some of them might be red herrings, it was true, but I really suspected that Owen's joy in details had lost him the larger picture, and thus, ultimately, his life.

"Yes, yes," Nicholas muttered, and went back to perusing his uncle's ledger. "I should report the murder, you know, to the authorities in Bantry, but I have no intention of doing so—at least, not until I've found the swine who did it."

"That may take days!" I exclaimed, thinking of the warmth of the afternoon and the body lying upon the bed upstairs.

As if divining my thought, his nose still buried in the book, Nicholas answered me absently. "There's no hurry yet. I've had him moved to the icehouse."

"Say no more," I replied, conjuring up evocative visions that needed no further elaboration.

"Hah, squeamish after all." Nicholas laughed, looking up from the ledger with flashing, challenging black eyes.

"No, no," I demurred, "merely imaginative."

"Clairvoyant, in fact." He laughed, making fun of me.

"That you shall know better hereafter," I muttered cryptically.

"And literary, too," he added.

"But of course. Haven't you finished reading that yet?" I urged impatiently.

"If you will stop these asides to me, I will. Now, be quiet."

"Yes, Nicholas." The meekness of my reply made him eye me with suspicion.

"I don't think that I trust you." He smiled. I smiled back, and he went on with his reading, until finally he closed the book with a snap and flopped clumsily into the chair behind his huge carved desk. Sir Hannibal Cheng looked down from the wall behind him with undisguised disapproval as his grandson, the third Baronet Cheng, flexed his muscular legs and laid his boots heavily against the edge of the massive desk. He sat there for some minutes lost in thought. "About the eavesdropper," he said finally. "All that elaborate outline of possible suspects is nothing but flummery, of course."

"It couldn't possibly have been Captain Vreeland," I defended.

"It might well have been! He had to meet my mother at some time or other to plan her flight from me. Owen saw someone in blue, and the captain certainly wore his uniform often enough. But actually it might have been anyone," he said with an impatient wave of his broad, blunt, powerful hand. "Whoever it was was not there intentionally to eavesdrop on your conversation, or, in fact, on any other. After all, did any of the three of you know that you were going to speak on the subject of the treasure? Didn't it come up as a matter of course?"

"Yes," I answered uncertainly, my mind traveling back to that night weeks earlier when Lady Elizabeth, tense and worried over her son's financial and romantic problems, had asked me to her rooms for a heart-to-heart talk. Owen's interruption had changed the course which our conversation would normally have taken, from the more personal and emotional to the story of the Cheng family and its lost treasure. I remembered how skeptical I had been at her reference to the treasure in the first place, and how Owen had insisted on her telling the whole tale. It had seemed silly to me at the time. Now I knew that it was all in deadly earnest; the treasure existed and must be found. "Yes," I confirmed again, "you are quite right."

"Of course I am. Someone was on the portico, either innocently taking the air—which is unlikely, since only you three, Mrs. Ling, or myself would have had the right to be there at that time of night—or else with some other purpose in mind, perhaps an assignation of some sort. Only chance, in other words, led whoever it was to overhear your voices and decide to listen in on the conversation."

"You are probably right," I agreed.

"I can't believe you actually said that," Nicholas said quietly with a sly grin.

I ignored him save for a gentle sniff and went on, "In fact, it was probably only Hannibal Ling. What we had to say would have had no meaning for him, but spying on us would be typical of him. Also, he has a peculiar way of appearing and disappearing like an *Arabian Nights* genie, so it would be no wonder that Owen, who was out onto the portico in a flash, couldn't find hide or hair of him."

By way of answer, Nicholas thumbed through the ledger book in his lap and shook his head quizzically. "Poor Owen, wasting all that thought and organization on something not only so obvious but also so totally immaterial."

"Do not, pray, condemn him so readily to futile imbecility until you have understood the full import of his list of questions," I suggested with a hint of asperity in my tone. Owen, after all, had not been a stupid man, and I did not wish to see him maligned or patronized when he could no longer defend himself.

"Was he being deliberately obscure, or were his brains really so addled?" Nicholas' question was deliberately insulting, and I chose to ignore its tone.

"Owen loved a joke very dearly, as you may have noticed. He knew quite well what the answers to those questions were, and the proper order in which they had any meaning. He was deliberately obscure. I've figured most of it out. Haven't you?" I asked sweetly.

Nicholas sighed in exasperation and slid the book across the desk toward me. "Go ahead, let's hear you riddle out the answers."

"Not very good at Chinese puzzles, are you, 'Nicky darling?'" I teased.

"Tsk, tsk," he clucked ruefully with a shake of his handsome head. "And just when I was beginning to find you almost tolerable."

I smiled a smug, secret smile under cover of finding my place in the ledger. "Here we are," I called out, coming to the page that began Owen's list of questions. "Well, the answer to number one is obvious, and given the answer to number one, the answer to number two is also obvious," I rattled on mischievously. "The answer to question three totally escapes me, as does the whole import of the question in the first place—"

Sir Nicholas interrupted me waspishly. "You know damned

well that I have not memorized that book. Will you read the bloody questions one by one, and then we'll discuss them? If not, then I'll go over it all by myself. I'm only allowing you to help me, after all, so you can feel that you've had a hand in avenging Owen." He sat up in his chair and glared at me fiercely. I suppose I deserved his wrath, for I knew I was deliberately baiting him, always an almost irresistible temptation for me.

"All right, all right," I snapped defensively. "By God, man, you have no humor in you at all, I swear! But, by the way, don't be too ready," I warned, "to either discount my help or to patronize me. I already know a good deal of this matter; more than you think, in fact, and in one area, at least, more than even Owen knew. It would not do to cross swords with me when we should be standing side by side, ready, rather, to cross them with those who are quite as anxious as we are to find what it is we seek."

"Conceded," Sir Nicholas snapped back at me, something of both anger and admiration in his looks.

"Now," I continued soberly, "in all seriousness, Owen obviously thought that if we could understand how Hannibal Ling manages to act like a genie, we'd be on our way to solving our mystery. Question two was very important to him. He thought that the lump of cobweb that we found on the portico was significant."

"When was all this? What cobweb?"

I explained how Owen had found the little mouse-colored clump and had believed it to be a clue to the eavesdropper. It was from that little thing that his "investigation" and eventually even his own murder ultimately sprang.

"All right, I understand. Do go on now to question three." Sir Nicholas' mind was quick, and he had a tendency to wax impatient under my perhaps overlong explanations. I wondered that I had ever thought him stolid.

"I don't understand this one at all myself. I haven't noticed anything odd about the placement of the paws of the lions flanking the entrance. Have you? I cannot imagine what he could have had in mind."

"Go on to the next question, then," he urged, frowning to himself.

"This one is obscure too. Why, in the painting of Sir Hannibal Cheng that hangs in Nicholas' library, is the book at his feet open to that particular page of that particular work?"

Here we both looked up at the painting behind the desk. "What is the particular work in question?" I asked.

"*A History of the Cheng Family in Ireland*, by Sir Hannibal Cheng, Bart."

"Your grandfather was an author?" I asked in surprise, having formed the opinion that he had been a rather reckless youth and idler who had turned to the sea in his later, steadier years. That he should have written a book that required research and discipline was rather a surprise.

"Oh, yes, all the Chéngs write. My father wrote verse in both Chinese and English. Some of it, he even published. Old Sir Hannibal, besides compiling the family history, was a prolific diarist." There was pride in his voice as he spoke of these things. I sought to encourage him.

"Yes, you mentioned his diaries one day. You ought to edit them for publication," I suggested.

"I've thought of it more than once. Perhaps I shall, one day. My great-grandfather wrote a military history of the Ming dynasty, and, of course, the founder thought himself enough of a poet to have that execrable verse carved in the mantelpiece." He smiled ruefully over his shoulder at it. "I don't, by the way, revere Owen's memory for the defacement he did yesterday." He smiled to himself and shook his dark head. "Poor bastard." It was as loving a tribute as might be expected on Nicholas' part toward his uncle, and would have been returned by Owen, had it been he who was left to mourn and avenge his nephew.

"Getting back—and I think we should—to question four, to just what particular page of the book is it open? I can't make any words out from here," I said, squinting at the painted book in an effort to see what Owen might have had in mind.

"You know, I don't even know myself. It has never occurred to me to look." Here Nicholas pushed himself back in his chair and bounded up onto his feet with a sudden burst of energy. He turned and examined the lower portion of the portrait, rubbing his fingers over the painted page as if trying to erase the years of age and grime that clung to the surface. "This really wants cleaning. All the smoke from years of burning tapers has begrimed the paint terribly. However, even though the words can't be made out any longer, its obvious by their disposition on the page that it's a scrap of verse."

"Yes, I can tell that even from here. It must be the same doggerel carved in the overmantel," I exclaimed.

"More than likely." Nicholas resumed his seat and once more put his booted feet against the desk. It offended my soul to the depths to see such a beautiful piece of furniture so abused. "What's the next question?" he prompted as I looked at the desk with a pained expression.

"The fifth question is insane," I warned by way of preamble. "Why is the Pekingese dog at his feet chewing on the book? Hannibal Cheng hated any dog smaller than a mastiff, and he didn't even like them particularly." Now, what do you make of that?" I asked.

"That's the easiest one so far. Obviously the dog is portrayed as chewing on the book in order to call special attention to it—the book, I mean. Owen's comment about Hannibal Cheng as animal lover is pure obfuscation. Of course, he had to have a Pekingese in this case. A mastiff desporting at his master's feet would have been ludicrous—almost as big as the man, and with a book looking like a tea biscuit in his huge jaws." Nicholas laughed to himself at the picture he had conjured up. I joined him in spite of myself, though I was striving hard to keep to the point.

"That sounds reasonable on all counts." I chuckled. "A pattern begins to emerge from these seemingly irrelevant questions, wouldn't you say?" I asked hopefully.

"I refuse to be optimistic until we've made sense of all the rest," he replied stiffly, coming down to earth with a thud of stolid reality. He was himself again.

"How dour and cautious of you," I remarked dryly.

"Dour, cautious people rarely wind up with swords in their backs." His reply was as dry as my own.

"Nor joy in their hearts."

"Let's change the subject, shall we, and get on with the next question."

"Yes, Sir Nicholas."

"Deirdre, I can bear you a lot better when you are less the formal, sarcastic little prig and more the venturesome, hot-tempered comrade-in-arms. Just drop the 'Sir' and call me Nicholas, as you have been doing, and we shall get along tolerably well."

I looked at him with chagrin, feeling as if I had just been spanked. "Question six," I muttered, my voice quavering with vexation. "Why, on the morning that Nicholas and Deirdre argued in the library," —a perfect subject to bring up at that particular moment, when I had just been chastised to nearly

the point of tears!—“‘did Hannibal Ling have a large, freshly bleeding contusion on his forehead?’”

We both stared blankly, Nicholas because he had no answer to the question and I because I was still mortified by his words. They had, in fact, some truth in them. I was often priggish and, oh, so smug; often unkind. It stung me to the quick, however, to have him call me on it, though, no matter how I might deserve the harsh words.

“Deirdre,” he said softly, “better go on to the next question. That one’s a poser.”

“Yes, Nicholas.” I knew the softness of his tone was meant in sympathy. He knew he’d stung me and was trying now to be kind. The kindness did not help. It only tended to make me more defensive. “In the seventh question he states that while on the portico outside my sitting room on that same morning he heard a sound as of—and here I quote—‘the ringing of a distant gong and a muffled cry. From whence came these sounds, and what caused them?’ Well?” I asked.

Nicholas shrugged. “I can’t imagine what he had in mind. Something to do with the bell tower? Unless . . . Deirdre, reread question six,” he ordered with a gleam in his eye.

I did so, and the light dawned on me, too. “The wound and the muffled cry was Hannibal Ling falling somewhere and injuring his head. He is a clumsy creature. But what does that have to do with anything? And where did the sound come from? The bell tower?” I was suddenly deflated. These conclusions, accurate though they must be, had no bearing on anything.

Nicholas shook his head, helpless to reply. “Go on. Question eight.” There was resignation in his voice.

“How extensive,” I read, “were the alterations that changed Sir Hannibal Cheng’s private study on the second floor into the bed-sitting rooms now occupied by Deirdre?”

“Skip that. I’ll have to search out the blueprints of the house and answer that one later. Go on.”

“Nine,” I pressed on with a sigh. “Why are the guardian lions on the facade of the house painted incorrectly in the background of Hannibal Cheng’s portrait?”

“Are they?” Nicholas asked in surprise.

“That is exactly what I asked Owen. I have never checked to see.” I rose from my chair and came around the desk to where Nicholas, once more on his feet, stood gazing up at the facade of Moondragon as it appeared behind Hannibal Cheng’s left shoulder. “What could he have meant?” He

shrugged his own broad shoulders, brushing against me slightly as he did. The solidity and bulk of him was so comforting somehow. It sent a little thrill of sensation shooting through my heart like a tiny, pleasant pain.

"It seems," he went on, "almost silly to say that you've never taken any notice of a pair of bronze statues eight or more feet high, but it's quite true that I haven't. I've seen them virtually every day of my life, and it only just now occurs to me that I don't really know what they're like. I used to clamber about all over them as a boy, of course, but I haven't given them a thought in years. Later we'll go and have a look. Maybe together we'll see what it was that he was implying."

"Then on to question ten. 'Why is that terrible bit of Pidgin English doggerel verse carved in the stone overmantel of the library fireplace?'"

"So it wouldn't be forgotten."

"Deathless verse, that." I laughed.

"Significant, evidently. Owen keeps harking back to it. My grandfather had it painted in his portrait. It has some secret meaning, obviously, and Owen, God bless him, hit upon whatever it is."

"Yes, he did," I agreed, remembering his words only the day before in that very room. "I suggested that you would be less than pleased with the mess he'd made, and he said he thought just the reverse. He said that you might well go down on your knees to him and kiss his boots—"

"That would be the day," Nicholas snorted.

"—and kiss his boots," I pursued, "before the week was out. He said he had found your treasure for you, thanks—as he put it—to his keen brain and my clairvoyant soul."

"Clairvoyant soul indeed! Deirdre, I would have thought you were one woman with more sense than that!"

"Pray do not antagonize me, Nicholas. I am keeping my temper quite well, despite the provocation of having been in your company for the better part of an hour. Let us keep to the main issues and leave your opinions of my clairvoyance aside for the nonce."

"Agreed." He grinned, and I had the feeling that *he* had been baiting *me*! Then he went on more soberly, "Owen had a couple of other questions, didn't he?"

"You know damned well he did—and both of them deal with precisely the kind of thing you've been scoffing at. Perhaps you'd like to bypass them as being insignificant?"

"No, no," he conceded hastily. "If Owen took all that nonsense seriously, then it behooves me, if only out of respect for the dead, to hear what he had in his mind."

"That was a rather flippant remark to make, under the circumstances, wasn't it?" I asked nastily.

"Yes, actually you are quite right. I am afraid you and I are letting the clash of our personalities get the better of us, and as a result, we seem helpless but to inject a rather untoward levity into our investigation." Nicholas had a very cool, haughty expression upon his face as he uttered these rather stuffy words. The tone of them had a vaguely familiar ring, and I eyed him with suspicion.

He tried to control his face, but finally burst out mirthfully, "That was you to the life, Deirdre, if I do say so myself. I vow, I never knew till now that I had the knack of mimicry. What a pity Owen is dead and Mother away. They'd have seen it at once. I swear I even got the tone of voice. If only Mrs. Ling wasn't such a stick and her son a mere half-wit, I'd call them in and entertain them with my new parlor trick—impressions of Miss Deirdre Fennora taken from the life." He slapped his thigh and stomped his boots against the edge of the desk.

"Whatever sport you choose to make of me, Sir Nicholas, have a care for the furniture," I sniffed righteously.

"There's that 'Sir' again," he growled. "By God, woman, you have no humor in you at all, I swear!" I let him laugh till he was spent, and then proceeded without further ado.

"Question eleven! 'What is the meaning of Deirdre's recurring nightmare?'" I started to open my mouth to explain, but he cut me short.

"Don't bother! I don't want to hear about it. If you want to discuss dreams, kindly do so in the scullery with the Irish servant girls. Such nonsense is meat and drink to them."

"Indeed, an admirable suggestion. I shall adjourn to the scullery at once." I got up in a fit of pique, hurling the ledger at his head as I did so. He caught it in one upraised hand with a small cry of triumph and watched me, eyes gleaming, as I stalked to the door. Before I could even touch the knob, he called out coolly, "It's locked, Deirdre, and this time I've pocketed the key."

"You have a penchant for locking doors, Nicholas."

"And you have a similar one for untimely exits. Come back like a good girl and sit down. The last question impresses me most of all, and only you can answer it."

" 'Why is Deirdre seeing the ghost, and what is the ghost trying to tell her?'" I recited, remembering how I had avoided discussing that very question with Owen, lest it incite me to further bad dreams. And that had been the most terrible night of all. I drew in my breath and steeled myself to tell Nicholas the story of my visions.

"I call her my Lady of the Dragon," I began.

" 'Of the Dragon'?" he fairly shouted, leaping into an upright position in his chair, his feet for once where they belonged—on the floor. "Why 'of the Dragon'?" he asked urgently.

"Do let me tell the tale in my own way. Interruptions will only serve to muddle things in my thoughts."

"Go on, then, go on," he urged impatiently, his eyes alight with a shrewd gleam.

And so it was that for the rest of the morning until luncheon was served I sat and told Nicholas Cheng every detail and impression of every sighting I had had of my Lady of the Dragon, from that first frosty night in Dublin to the last, when she had awaited me on the portico as I left Owen's digs and accompanied me to Lady Elizabeth's sitting room. That had been only two nights before.

He sat rapt with totally undivided attention, which surprised me no end. I had expected him to exclaim and protest and deride me at every turn, but no! He listened with the utmost concern, the expression on his face fierce and full of concentration. His beautiful, large, expressive eyes gleamed with the light of quick intelligence, his firm jaw was set, his broad, high cheekbones suffused with color as they always were when his emotions were in any way exercised. Since, as was his wont of most mornings, he wore riding clothes, I could see that his muscular body was as tense with emotion as was his handsome face. There was, in fact, such magnetism in his whole aspect that as I spoke I found it difficult to concentrate my own thoughts upon the details of my narrative. Had I not exerted a special effort, I could easily have lost the thread of my story in contemplation of his own distracting presence. It was only by dint of much effort that I kept my thoughts where they belonged.

Finally I had detailed the entire history of my experiences with my Lady of the Dragon. "And that is when I last saw her, save for my sighting of her in the dream garden of my nightmare the other night," I concluded.

Nicholas said nothing for a while, and I, for one, was glad

of the moment of silence. I had been talking for a very long time, and my voice wanted a rest.

"Sightings, visions—such words are nonsense."

"Nonsense?" I protested. He had seemed so involved in the tale that I had assumed him to believe me. I was completely taken aback.

"Be quiet and hear me out. I am not denying that you have seen this woman. I mean, merely, that such words do not describe your relationship with her accurately enough. She is no mere vision; she is a sentient being—not corporeal perhaps, but nevertheless capable of thought and communication, even as we ourselves. I do not believe she can communicate with anyone else but you. In fact, obviously she cannot, or one of us in the household would have been her likely choice as a contact. And that would have been years ago. I think you two were quite correct in concluding that she can make contact with you because of the circumstances of your conception—it having taken place here in this very house." Here he had the decency to look somewhat embarrassed. "There is some sort of link between, which must have been formed then. More speculative than that, I will not become, since I have had, up until this afternoon, no belief in any sort of so-called supernatural manifestations. In fact, even now I refrain from assuming this to be a supernatural creature. She is a human being, as natural as we are, but living on a different plane perhaps than we."

"That is as supernatural or metaphysical or whatever an explanation as any that might be given at a meeting of the Psychical Research Society." I smiled tolerantly.

"Perhaps the word I'm groping for is 'supranatural,' as opposed to 'supernatural,'" Nicholas amended with a wave of his hand. He was quite in earnest now.

"Ah, yes, I see what you mean now. There is somewhere a natural explanation for her, though by the standards of our current knowledge of nature and science, there appears to be none beyond her being a mere ghost."

"Exactly. Come, let's have lunch, and maybe, if you are civil to me, I will tell you just who your Lady of the Dragon really is."

"Who she is?" I looked at Nicholas in disbelief.

"Of course. I knew the moment you described her in those terms just who she is. Her name is the Lady Moon Pearl, and I would give my right arm and half the treasure she guards to see her for myself. She is my remote ancestress, you see, and

the guardian of the Cheng-family fortunes, the fruitful womb whence we have all sprung."

With that enticing remark, he offered me his arm, unlocked the library doors, and escorted me in to our luncheon.

It was no pleasant thing to sit alone within the quiet confines of my sitting room that evening. Lady Elizabeth's absence created a great void, for she had suffused all of us with her own warmth and vivacity. I could, however, rationalize my loneliness for her company by rejoicing in the happy turn her life was taking after so many years of putting duty before pleasure.

But Owen was a different matter altogether. That dear, lively, boyish rogue, full of merry ways, and poignant with his sudden, earnest hopes for a future that would never be his, filled my heart with an aching, quiet grief that could not help but be tinged with guilt. I had not taken him seriously, had not loved him as he wished me to. Indeed, I do not think, in fairness to myself, that I ever could have, but now he was gone, and I regretted that I had not, for his sake, committed myself to him as he strove to have me do. In these twenty-odd hours since his death, I had tried to salve my sorrow and my conscience with thoughts of revenge; with the seeking out of the treasure, and hence, hopefully, the discovery of his murderer, but this would be, I realized as I sat alone in the silent room, small comfort indeed.

While it was not late, I felt drowsy. The strains of the past few days were overtaking my body, although I steadfastly refused to let them take hold of my mind. I dimmed the lamp in the sitting room, and taking a candlestick, walked into my bedroom. Nicholas had promised to send for me if he discovered anything among the blueprints of Moondragon that might indicate an answer to Owen's question about Hannibal Cheng's study, which had once occupied the suite I now inhabited. That might take some time, and so I decided to lie down, fully clothed, upon the bed and rest till I should receive a summons to the library. It would be well if I slept, I thought, and allowed myself to drift gradually into a light slumber.

It was the sound of rapid, moist, openmouthed breathing that caused me to awaken with a start. Someone was in the room with me, hovering near my bed. I kept my eyelids as still as possible, trying to survey the room from beneath my lashes. The only light was the palest yellow glow that came

from the lamp in the sitting room. By its faint illumination I could make out the small, motionless form of Hannibal Ling staring down at me from beside the bed. He held one hand extended toward me, and I could just catch the glint of gold emanating from some small object that he held in his fingertips.

I dared not move, though I felt as if my heart would burst with the sheer terror I felt. There was no way of telling what he might do—how he might behave—if I did move or show that I was awake. Instead, I lay as still as possible, every muscle of my body at the ready, should I have need to leap to my own defense. I salivated and swallowed several times, hoping by that action to be prepared to scream if it became necessary. A parched throat would be of no avail at all, should I have to call out.

I saw him bend over my hand, which lay alongside my tensed body, and pick it up with a surprising tenderness and delicacy for one so uncoordinated as Hannibal Ling. Needless to say, it took all my might to keep from starting or crying out as he touched me. He lifted my arm and slipped a heavy band of icy-cold metal around my wrist. Then, laying my arm out again upon the coverlet, he stroked the hand and wrist, cooing delightedly to himself at the effect of his gift.

I, for my part, found myself slipping, though I fought valiantly not to, into another clairvoyant vision. Once more I was in the unutterable darkness of that stone-bound tomb, my back racked by the hard slab on which I was stretched as if I would break. The golden bracelet that had for so long encircled the dry bones of my wrist was wrenched from me clumsily and by main force. Though I felt relieved to have the burdensome weight of the gold away from me, yet why, I lamented, must my bones be scattered so? Why my skin, once so soft and perfumed and lovely, be ground to dust under the crude hands of a pillaging marauder? Would this nightmare never end? Having died, would I wait forever for Death to come for me?

I fought, as one who gasps for air in an enclosed place, and was myself again. The bracelet was warm now upon my arm and did not frighten me as had the ring the day before. I knew now by whose hand they had been borne to me and from whence they had ultimately come. I knew that there was no cause to fear.

I opened my eyes cautiously and looked about. Hannibal Ling, I saw at once, was no longer in the bedroom, but I

could hear him moving about in the next room. I leaped instantly from the bed, calling his name as I rose. He uttered a stricken, inarticulate cry and was heard no more. Within seconds I was in the sitting room, intending to confront him as kindly and gently as my rather unraveled nerves would allow.

"Hannibal," I called again, more softly, "Hannibal, don't be afraid, I won't harm you."

I spoke to the unheeding air. The room, I could see at once, was empty—locked, every door and window of it, from the inside, but nevertheless empty.

The Beckoning Fair One

How loved, how honoured once, avails thee not,
To whom related, or by whom begot;
A heap of dust alone remains of thee;
'Tis all thou art, and all the proud shall be!

—Alexander Pope

When one is confronted with a seemingly insoluble problem, one has but two alternatives—to ignore it or to solve it. It has ever been my stubborn nature to choose the latter course, though, I admit, not always with success. My father was wont to laugh at me and say that I fought against fate. Perhaps I do, but at the moment I surveyed my sitting room and saw that despite all logic, Hannibal Ling had truly vanished like the proverbial genie into the bottle, I could not help but set my mind to the solution.

Until some thirty years ago these rooms had been one, the private domain of Sir Hannibal Cheng himself. After his death it had been renovated into the suite that I now occupied. Yet, the room—that part of it, at any rate, that now formed my sitting room—had held a secret then, and it still held that secret now. Somewhere within its confines was a panel that led away to another part of the house. How else had the boy disappeared? Why else had Owen been concerned with old Sir Hannibal's study?

I sat upon the sofa and let my eyes wander about the walls, evaluating the likelihood of a passageway being concealed behind any one of them. The walls were paneled in some dark wood to a height of about six feet. Above was an antique paper of Chinese motif in shades of green and yellow on buff. The paper reached nearly to the ceiling, which was

of buff-painted plaster strapworked into a Chinese geometric pattern. Clearly, any passageway must be hidden behind that paneling, which was most likely the only original part of the room remaining, aside from the ceiling itself.

The outer wall, I reasoned, was an unlikely spot to begin looking. It was taken up by the pair of double doors leading to the portico, with the ornately figured Chinese desk dominating the space between them. In either corner was a heavy pedestal bearing a large bronze demon. It was unlikely that the boy would have been able to enter or leave so readily if his escape route was in either corner.

The common wall to my bedroom I was able to discount at once, for not only must the passage antedate the thirty-year-old renovation, but I thought I could detect that the panels were of a different wood, though darkened to match the original walls. That left only the inner wall, which had the upper hall on its other side, and the eastward, or fireplace, wall for me to search. I dismissed as unlikely the idea of a panel and passage being built into the inner wall. After all, any unnatural thickness would be easily detected as one passed to and fro through the doorway.

Having eliminated three possible places, I rose in order to set about sounding the fourth, the woodwork to either side of the small marble fireplace with its bronze fender and demonic-looking oriental firedogs. Actually, I had only to glance at the floor along the wall to find what I was after. Several motes of dust, smaller than the one that Owen had picked up on the portico, but similar in color and texture, lay scattered along the base of the wall on the far side of the fireplace nearest the portico doors. The closest piece of furniture was over eighteen inches away and therefore made no difficulty for one as small as Hannibal Ling. With my wide skirt and bustle, I had to move the table in order to get into the corner formed by the stone of the fireplace and the paneled wall itself. I examined the woodwork carefully. If there was a secret panel, it must slide to the right, I reasoned, or else the stone of the fireplace would interfere with it. Therefore I began fingering the ornately carved wood along the left-hand side, hoping to find some sort of spring or latch.

Muttering imprecations under my breath, feeling more urgency to be on with things as the minutes seemed to crawl by, I probed and pressed and tapped. All at once my efforts were rewarded. Something made a clicking sound, and a section of the dark wooden panel loosened under my hand. It

did not, as such panels are wont to do in the more sensational novels, spring open with a bound, but by the way in which it gave, I could see that to open it farther I had only to slide it to the right, as I had suspected in the first place. With the elation of a child and the patience of a saint, I forbore at that minute to do so, however. Instead, I ran quickly to my bedroom, slipped as fast as possible out of my unwieldy dress with its bustle and trailing skirts, cursing every recalcitrant button as I undid the bodice, and after removing the bustle, put on my dressing gown, wrapping it tightly about me and pinning it just above the calf of my leg, so that although it was loose and unencumbered enough below the knee for me to run, the voluminous skirt and my petticoats beneath were tight to my hips and did not hamper me in any way.

Taking up my candlestick and stuffing an extra taper in my pocket, along with a box of matches and a ball of crochet cotton from a workbasket in the corner, I made my way hastily back to the fireplace, stopping only long enough to light the candle and pick up a poker to use as a weapon, should it prove necessary. Thus armed, my heart beating with excitement and no little joy within my breast, I slid open the panel and stepped into the tiny, dark space beyond.

"Through the looking glass, little Alice," I whispered aloud to myself, at once both terrified and delighted with my adventure. As soon as I was inside the small, confined space behind the wall, I turned my candle toward the inner side of the panel, where I quickly spied the mechanism of the little latch that closed it. It was rusty and had a tendency to stick, but I worked it back and forth several times to make certain that I could open it in a trice, should I need to. Then I closed the panel completely, so that it would be undetected from the sitting room, and tied the end of the crochet cotton to the knob on the latch, leaving a trail of cord to follow in case my candles and matches should fail me in the dark.

Thus prepared, the cotton thread ready to feed through my fingers as I walked, the candle burning in my hand, an extra candle and matches in my pocket, and the poker worn in the fashion of a sword in the belt of my dressing gown, I turned cautiously and began to examine my surroundings. As I did, from beyond the paneling came a familiar sound; I could just hear the clock on my desk in the room I had just left chime ten. Barely fifteen minutes had elapsed since I watched Hannibal Ling place the bracelet on my wrist. A great deal had

happened in that quarter of an hour. A great deal more would happen in the next, I assured myself with some little trepidation.

The space in which I now crouched was stifling, and filthy with dust. At my back was the stone wall of the fireplace, at each side the wood and plaster and lath of the adjoining rooms—the sitting room to my right, and another guest room to my left. The floor was stone—the granite top, I surmised, by an estimate of my location in the house, of one of the four huge buttresses that held up the curving granite ground-floor walls of Moondragon itself. Whether all the immense buttresses, each twenty feet high and eight feet thick, were built in the same fashion, I could not say, but this one at any rate was hollow. At my feet was a narrow staircase built right into the stone. It was barely two feet in width, and descended steeply into the darkness in the direction of the outer, or front, wall of the house. There was no way to go but down, and so down I went, almost expecting to find a tiny door at the foot with a large key and a bottle labeled "Drink Me." "Curiouser and curioser," I said aloud, to pluck up my courage with humor.

The undressed stone was chilly to the touch, and as I descended, I found the air, though still stuffy and dust-laden, to be cooler and easy to breathe. At first, all was silent as a grave, and save for the small illumination afforded by my candle, as dark as one. Then, from somewhere below me in the blackness, far beyond the range of my candlelight, came a sound of heavy blows and a smashing and splintering of wood. I hastily blew out the flame and shrank back against the wall at the foot of the first flight of stairs. My next step would have taken me to a tiny landing, barely two feet square, and thence to a turn in the stairway. With the violent sounds issuing from below, I dared not turn that corner and descend any farther. Instead, I slid my candle into my pocket and eased the poker out of my belt, holding it before me in the pitch blackness so that I might strike out at once if necessary.

Suddenly the battering stopped, and the blackness was shattered by a long jagged ray of dim light that cast a shadow against the wall in front of me, where the steps turned and went downward. It was the shadow of the upper portion of a man, and was thrown upon the dark granite with a sinister distortion that was terrible to behold. The shadow moved slowly, growing larger as it did, until I realized that

the man who cast it was approaching me, coming soundlessly up the steps toward the very landing above which I stood. I raised the poker higher, prepared to strike a blow if need be, when I heard a familiar sound and realized that he—whoever he might be—had just struck a match and was sure to discover me in seconds. I thought it best to act first and thus have the advantage of surprise over the intruder. Therefore, before he had a chance to make the turn up onto the landing himself, I stepped down and confronted him, brandishing the poker and ready to lash out in an instant.

"Deirdre, for the love of God, you!"

"Nicholas," I gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"You have a habit of asking that question!" he said dryly. "Doesn't it occur to you that this is my house?" He burned his fingertips on the match and shook it out in annoyance. Now only the light cast from the open panel below us invaded the darkness.

"Pray do not let us bandy words now," I suggested, breathless and trembling from the strain of the last few minutes. "There is not a moment to lose. Hannibal Ling has been in my bedroom. I surprised him, and he escaped through a movable panel hidden in the sitting-room wall."

"Then that's what I heard," Nicholas whispered.

"Whatever do you mean?" I asked.

"I heard a noise in the wall. A bumping sound as if someone had fallen and landed against the paneling in the library. If he was fleeing from you, he must have missed his footing in his haste to get away."

"Is that where you have come from? The library?"

"Yes. It's just below. These steps lead up to your suit?"

"To my sitting room—once part of Sir Hannibal Cheng's study, if you remember Owen's question—but evidently no farther. The boy has gone down, then, even below ground level, if he did not emerge into the library."

"Well, he did not. And nothing in the blueprints indicates that this buttress or any other is hollow."

"Of course not, silly. It wouldn't be a secret then, would it?" I laughed in spite of myself, though our situation was hardly laughable.

"That is a point well taken," Nicholas conceded. "There is no sense in my going up, I guess. Go back to your rooms, and I shall go on down and see if I can find him."

"Never mind him! There is more at the end of this pas-

sageway than Hannibal Ling. Owen has been down here, too."

"How do you know that?"

"As I lay in that disgraceful undignified position upon the parlor rug the other night, I had a splendid view of Owen's boots. They were filthy as yours and mine must now be, if only we had a light by which to see ourselves. Later on, as he lay in the bell tower, I saw that, if anything, his clothing and boots were even filthier than they had been earlier."

"I noticed what a mess he looked too, but I didn't give it much thought," Nicholas admitted.

"Don't feel badly. You didn't know about the cobweb that we'd found then. I did, and put two and two together at once," I comforted him. "Hannibal Ling left it on the portico that night. I'm sure of it."

"You really do have a brain, Deirdre. You think like a man."

"I am not so sure that that is a compliment, Nicholas, though I acknowledge that you do mean it as one," I whispered dryly. "But enough of this chatter. We had best go on down and see where these steps lead."

"I'm going down. You go back." Nicholas lit another match and raised it toward the stairs at my back. "Go on," he urged with the tone one uses to a pet dog.

I coolly withdrew a candle from my pocket and lit it in the flame that he held. "Have you brought any of these?" I asked.

"Candles? No. I . . . I . . ." The match burned low, and he dropped it with an oath.

I lowered my candle toward our feet. "Turkey slippers," I remarked. "How practical for exploring secret passageways in the dead of night." I wiggled my own already dusty little foot, clad in pretty but nevertheless sturdy walking shoes. "Note my clothing, which affords mobility without being cumbersome. Note, on the other hand, your own long, voluminously skirted dressing gown, which sweeps the stairs with your every step. You not only run the risk of tripping as you walk, but you leave a trail in the dust quite as obvious as slug tracks in a garden. Light another match, Nicholas," I suggested pointedly.

He groped in his pockets. "I haven't any more."

"Nor a weapon? Nor a means of finding your way in the dark?" I added, holding up my ball of cotton. "You are ill-prepared for this adventure, my friend. Still, since you are

large and strong and brave, I shall lend you a candle and my poker and let you come along with me on my quest." I was being unmerciful, but I had started out so well prepared and bravely that I felt I deserved my smug little moment of triumph.

"But you are a woman, blast it," he spluttered.

"And a damned well-equipped one at that! Are we going together, or do I push past you and go oh alone?"

"Damn you. You are a bitch."

"Conceded. Are you with me or not?"

"Come down into the library a moment, then, while I make a few preparations of my own," he said grudgingly.

"Now, that's a sensible suggestion." I followed Nicholas down the steep stone steps to a tiny lower landing from which a second sliding panel opened into the huge library. This panel, however, had not been opened in proper fashion. Rather, Nicholas had given up trying to open it properly and had shattered it by means of a large bronze figurine, with such force as had done no good to either the paneling itself or the priceless bronze, which lay dented and bent on the floor amidst the long splinters of wood. "Well, that's one secret panel that won't be a secret anymore. By morning, Mrs. Ling will have your carpenters building linen closets between the walls." I eyed him slyly across the room, and he scowled at me in the most attractive way. He was standing by his desk which was strewn with great rolls of blueprints, some recent, others faded and drawn on sheets of antique vellum and parchment. As I watched, he removed his dressing gown and scarf and stood in his dress trousers and stiff-fronted shirt. He tore off the collar and tossed it aside, scattering onyx studs as he did. Then, rolling up his sleeves above the elbow to expose hard muscular forearms and biceps, he stood before me, his arms akimbo.

"The slippers will have to do. Otherwise, am I dressed suitably now?" he challenged.

"Admirably." I smiled. The very look of him gave me a little thrill of pleasure.

He opened the door of a small chest and took out a lantern, lit it, and pocketed the matches. "You can keep your poker. I'll carry this," he said, removing a gun from the top drawer of his desk and hefting it dramatically as he came across the room toward me. Just as he was about to enter the passageway again, he thought of something and checked himself.

"Before I forget, Deirdre. Do you remember what the blade looked like that killed Owen?"

"Yes, of course. It was an ancient Chinese sword, all green bronze."

"Like this one?" Nicholas asked, walking back across the room toward the glass-fronted bookcases that housed his collection of Chinese manuscripts and antiquities. He pointed at a sword lying along the front of one of the shelves.

"Yes, only, if anything, the patina on the murder weapon was greener."

"I thought so too. Some idiot carried the weapon out to the icehouse with the body, so I haven't had a chance to compare them, but the thing is that I can't imagine where the murder weapon actually came from. As far as I can recall, this is the only sword of its type in my collection."

"Can't you indeed? I should have thought it was obvious myself. The murder weapon, the ring that I awoke wearing the other morning, and the bracelet I am wearing now all came from the same source—the hands of Hannibal Ling." I took a moment to tell Nicholas about how the boy had awakened me by placing the bracelet on my wrist just a bare forty minutes or so before.

"Hannibal Ling? Then it was he—"

"Indeed it was!" I broke in. "Now, shall we try to find him and whatever else there is to find down there?" Together and in haste, we went to the shattered panel and entered the passageway behind it.

From this point on down, the walls were entirely of stone, cold and rough, the passage narrow—barely two feet wide. The air was dry and dusty, though the cool stone made the temperature even and comfortable. As we descended, having made a turn that took us steeply down in the direction once more of the front of Moondragon, our every step stirred the great swaths of old, dusty cobweb that hung like shrouds from the rough walls and low ceiling. The dust billowed into the dead air, lighting on our clothes and hair and tickling our noses, which caused us to pause every so often to stifle a sneeze. While Nicholas' lantern was safe, my candle constantly guttered and flickered as it ignited the falling particles.

"We must be below the level of the cellars by now," Nicholas whispered, turning to offer me a hand as we moved slowly down the even steeper, irregularly cut flight before us. I slid my hand into his and let him grip it for a moment.

"Thank you, Nicholas," I said, pulling away. "I can man-

age, I think. If I have need, I'll steady myself on your shoulder."

"All right. Mind your footing, though. The steps are very bad in places," he warned.

"So I've noticed," I said, wincing as my ankle twisted on the treacherous, uneven steps.

We made two more right-angle turns and found ourselves in a short, slightly inclined, but more or less level tunnel that took us again toward the front of the house. It was becoming imperative that I keep track now, for my ball of cotton was nearing its end. "In not many more yards I'll be out of cord, Nicholas," I whispered in warning.

"Drop bread crumbs, then," he retorted.

"Nicholas!" I protested. He was beginning to sound almost like me, I thought.

"I didn't want to say anything back there," he whispered, stopping and turning to me with an air of confidentiality that was greatly exaggerated by the fact that he had to hunch his broad, strong body toward me in the narrow confines of the low-ceilinged tunnel, "but in your overzealous enthusiasm, did it not occur to you that it is very hard to get lost in a passage not two feet wide? The trail of cord is a cunning idea but entirely superfluous."

"And does it not occur to you that, at the time, I had no way of knowing that it would be either so narrow or so easily negotiable? Moreover, we have not yet reached the end of it, have we? It may yet come in handy to have left a trail."

"Persistent wench, aren't you? All right, I'll admit that we haven't yet come to the end, and we might need it if the way becomes confused, but I wouldn't bet on it."

"Well, don't worry. If worse comes to worst and the way ahead does become more complicated, I can always return to the end of the cotton and begin to unravel the belt of my dressing gown. It is of macramé work and will undo easily."

"Marvelous. Resourceful to the end! Now, can we get on? The suspense is killing me."

"Is it, now? How odd. I feel quite calm myself," I lied.

We moved ahead in tense silence. Suddenly the passage made a ninety-degree angle to the right, went on for perhaps twenty more feet, and ended abruptly in a blank wall.

"This is it? It doesn't go on any farther?" Nicholas asked in bewildered disappointment.

"Shhh. Let me think." I waved him to be quiet. Then, holding my candle high over my head, I examined the long

south wall carefully. It was of large, rough stone blocks, just as was the entire length of the secret stairway and tunnel that we had just left. "Do you realize exactly where we are, Nicholas?"

"Haven't the foggiest, woman," he said in annoyance.

"You have no sense of direction, have you?" I remarked.

"Not below ground, I don't," he snapped. "And don't tell me that you do, for I won't believe it."

"Well, I do," I retorted. "Think back a minute to Owen's questions about the guardian lions in front of the house."

"Deirdre, this is no time for silly questions."

"There is no better time, Nicholas," I insisted. "What did Owen ask himself? Think, man!"

"He asked what was odd about the lions' paws," he answered grudgingly.

"Yes," I prompted. "What else? Didn't he ask why they were painted incorrectly in Hannibal Cheng's portrait?"

"Yes, yes, but so what?" He was being beastly impatient with me. "What does all this have to do with anything?"

"Oh, Nicholas, you have such a brain, but your wits are as slow as treacle. Can't you make the connections? If you could only realize where we are right now and what Owen was trying to say, it would all fall into place." I was so exasperated that I nearly raised my voice.

"Calm down. Obviously this is no place to talk. I have a dislike of confined spaces and cul-de-sacs, to begin with. One should always have an escape route at one's back, and we have none. Nor, evidently, did Owen. I have no intention of joining him just yet."

"All right, let's go back to the library and talk. But then we are coming down here again—and tonight, Nicholas Cheng, or else!"

"Or else what?"

"Or else I shall go mad with suspense." I laughed, and so did he, thus breaking the tension that had been mounting between us. We turned and retraced our steps together.

I ducked my head and stepped through the broken paneling into the library, crossing immediately to the portrait of Hannibal Cheng on the far wall. Nicholas came up behind me and stood at my side, his gaze searching the painted facade of Moondragon with uncomprehending eyes.

"There is nothing wrong with the lions," he said finally.

"Yes there is," I insisted.

"What?"

"Look at the paws."

"I am looking," he shouted.

"But not seeing!" I retorted. "Ah, well, I had better explain it, or we'll be here all night."

"Perhaps you had better," he snapped. "I'm not very good at Chinese puzzles, remember?"

"I think Owen first began to realize that there was a strange deformity in the lions on the day you and I had our quarrel in the library," I went on, ignoring his sarcasm. "When I returned to my rooms, the carpenters were repairing the doorjamb you had kicked in, and your uncle was waiting for me on the portico just outside the sitting room. As I came toward him, he was leaning over the balustrade and looking almost straight down. His concentration was so great that I was able to come up beside him and follow his gaze before he even noticed me. I remember asking him what was so fascinating, but he didn't answer me. We went on to other topics instead. Now, looking back with the aid of hindsight, I realize he was looking down at the lions, noticing something very peculiar about them, something that I noticed at once this evening when I looked over the balustrade again myself." I paused.

"Go on," Nicholas said quietly.

"The inner paws, the ones that rest on the crystal moons, are not pointing straight forward, as would be natural in an animal in that position, but rather are turned markedly outward. I noticed the odd positioning this afternoon when we looked at them together in the courtyard, but it wasn't until I saw them from above that I realized just how peculiar they are. The inner paws are actually in a forty-five-degree angle from the norm."

"The sculptor, or bronze caster, or whoever, didn't know his anatomy."

"Oh, he probably knew anatomy well enough. He probably also knew how to follow orders. Your ancestor Cheng Ch'engkung wanted them cast just so."

"Indeed?"

"But it wasn't the paws that Owen noticed first. He was drawn to look down at the lions by a sound he heard. Remember? A muffled cry and the sound as of a distant gong?"

"Yes, and Hannibal Ling turned up later with a bloody forehead. He'd been playing about in the bell tower."

"No, Nicholas. He'd been playing around in the lions."

"Owen would have seen him, then."

"No, Nicholas, not *on* the lions. *In* the lions."

"In them," he breathed. "Yes, they are hollow, but—"

"But nothing, man. Think! The crystal eyes! In the old days, when Bantry Bay was a convenient place for French invaders bent on restoring the Jacobites to the throne, Cheng Ch'engkung took a French flagship. He was given land on these shores by William III as a reward—and surely as a loyal Orange lookout post. Men stationed in the guardian lions in time of danger would have a perfect view—totally unseen, yet with a wide view of the bay and the sea beyond Bere Island."

"Granted," he conceded. "That is how Moondragon became ours. That's also how Hannibal Cheng got his baronetcy, in fact. He led a raiding party that repelled a small French fleet that tried to land here in 1796. He stopped them, and at the urging of his friend Ernest, later Duke of Cumberland, was created a baronet by George III. So, fine! It's all possible. Hollow they are, lookout posts they may be, and Hannibal Ling may know how to get into them—I surely don't—but what has that to do with the position of the paws and the secret of the treasure?"

"The guardian lions, as they seem always to be called, guard the bay, guard Moondragon itself. They also guard the treasure."

"The treasure? The secret may well be here—in fact, must be here—and Owen probably did stumble onto it, but the hoard is actually somewhere on Taiwan." Nicholas said this with great vehemence, but the look in his hot brown eyes told me he was beginning to see what I saw.

"The lions guard the treasure," I reiterated. "Guard the treasure and point to it."

"Then that's what Owen was saying in his obscure way in his questions about the painting. The portrait painter wasn't concerned with the background. Probably made a few rapid sketches of Moondragon, the lions, and the tower, and then painted them in later, after completing my grandfather's figure and the dog and book in the foreground.

"When he came to paint the lions on the facade of the house, he painted them as they would normally appear—with the paws straight forward, in a natural position. Having seen the odd angle on which they are actually cast, Owen then noticed them in the portrait and made his deduction. He rea-

soned that they must deviate from a natural position for a reason."

Things were falling into place so rapidly that we could scarcely contain ourselves. Clue upon clue began to make sense as he went on talking, as much for his own benefit as for mine.

"Now, Owen stressed Hannibal Ling's ability to disappear seemingly at will. That's easy! The boy knew—had discovered in his unheeded nosing about over the years—the secret passageway that leads to our two rooms and maybe elsewhere besides. We'll have to explore more carefully at our leisure. Owen also noted that the wound on the boy's head coincided with the hollow gonging and the cry he'd heard earlier. It just chanced that Owen was standing on the portico at the time the boy was playing within one of the hollow lions, fell, and made the brazen, bell-like sound against the interior. So far, so good?"

"So far, very good. That's just how you discovered the secret passage. His falling behind the wall alerted you," I replied. Nicholas looked at me with a certain admiration as he leaned back against his desk with his arms folded across his chest.

"The other thing that Owen stressed over and over again was the 'Pidgin English doggerel,' as he called it. It appears in Hannibal Cheng's portrait, over the mantelpiece, and in the Cheng family history. Why? It has no merit whatsoever as verse. But it has merit as a clue to the secret of the treasure." I walked over to the fireplace and looked up at the carved words. "The Dragon have taloon," I read. "The dragon is the symbol of your house, right?"

"Yes, and they have talons like a bird. Go on."

"The Lion have paw."

"Self-evident."

"Each of these Beastes bear in his claw/ The orb of the Moon."

"True. The Cheng dragon always holds the moon in his claws or in his teeth. It symbolizes that our fortunes began with our ancestress Ywe Liang Jenju, the Lady Moon Pearl, who was the favorite wife of one of the last Ming-dynasty emperors, Shen Tsung."

"The next line reads: 'And gold of the Sonne.'" I paused.

"Well"—Nicholas shrugged, completely missing the way in which I stressed certain words in the line—"the sun is golden, and though the only suns that I've ever seen associated with

our family dragon are the little gold balls in the frieze on the mantelpiece there, I assume that it was simply an analogy to the heavenly sun and moon. Simple."

"So one might think, unless one chooses to read it slightly differently, as Owen did and as I now do."

"How so?"

"The next lines are very important," I went on, ignoring his question for a moment. "Lions do give/ What Dragon have wonne.'"

"What does it mean, since you think you know?"

"Lions, the guardian lions outside, give with their paws what the Dragons—your Cheng ancestors, the pirate Chengs, have won with their claws or weapons—the treasure, in other words. These lions with moons in their paws yield up—its so simple, really—the gold of the *son*. S-o-n," I spelled out, "not s-u-n, as one might think. The verse is deliberately misleading."

Nicholas saw it for himself finally and spoke up tensely, "The claws—weapons—of my people, the dragons, won gold. The guardian lions with their paws bearing moons give up the secret of where the gold is hidden to the sons of the dragons."

"Simple, isn't it?" I remarked. "Had he lived, your father would have shared the secret with you in your childhood, and you would have grown up knowing what the verse actually meant, never realizing how ambiguous the words would seem to the unknowing."

"True, true. But getting back to the lions and how they point to the treasure. Since the paw of each lion is bent toward the other on a forty-five-degree angle, they actually point to the center of the courtyard in front of the house." He stopped a moment. "Surely we aren't supposed to dig . . . ? No, wait," he cried, waving his hand to silence me. "You asked when we were below in that long dead-end tunnel where I thought we were, and I said that I didn't know. But I know now. We were facing south across the bay, just as the lions do. In fact, we must have been just under and behind the lions themselves.

"For God's sake, Deirdre, let's not waste any more time." He was aflame now with his newfound knowledge, and ready to get on with it.

"Please, Nicholas, wait a moment. There is something that I must get from my room, and you must find another lantern

for me. I'd much prefer it to the candles I have been using, for my hands and skirt are all over dripping wax."

Taking the light from him, I ducked into the wall with a whispered "I'll be right back," and by the small, steady beam of his lamp, went back up the steps to the panel that led into my sitting room. Within minutes I had returned to the library, the gold ring that Hannibal Ling had placed on my finger in the pocket of my dressing gown. Nicholas was waiting for me with another, larger lantern and a small gun.

"Do you want this?" he asked, thrusting the weapon toward me handle-first.

"No, thank you. I have never used a gun in my life; the poker will do nicely. I have always had a violent streak in me, which throwing or striking out satisfies far better than would the mere pulling of a trigger."

"Sanguinary wench, aren't you?"

"In my imagination, at least. I have never actually had a chance to strike a blow in anger."

"May you never have need to, Deirdre," Nicholas said in a softer tone than he was wont to use to me.

"Or if I must, may I strike well," I answered with a smile.

"Bloodthirsty." He laughed with a rueful shake of the head. "Let us go."

Once more we made our way into the passage behind the wall and began a descent into the bowels of Moondragon.

We were old hands now at negotiating the treacherously uneven granite steps of the secret recesses of Moondragon, and so were able to move swiftly back toward the long cul-de-sac that lay under the front facade of the house.

I was some few steps behind Nicholas, who was fired with renewed enthusiasm, for he now smelled at the end of the tunnel more than the mere apprehension of Hannibal Ling and possible revenge of his uncle's murder. Something else called him thither, and he hastened on.

By the steadier light of the lamp I now carried in place of the candles of my earlier exploration—though the stubs of them and a box of matches remained in one of my pockets as a precaution—I was able to see better and farther into the blackness of the passage. It was this fact that permitted me to be less preoccupied with my footing and more with the walls that enclosed me. We were just making the final turn from the steps into the inclined tunnel, and being a bit behind my companion, I chanced to look left as I turned to follow him.

Something about the wall caught my eye. First of all, it was recessed rather than flush with the wall of the stairway, and though built of granite blocks like the rest, had a slightly different look to it.

I stopped and touched the stones before me. They felt just the same as the others. Still . . . With my eyes I traced the edges of the blocks carefully. The mortar, hardly noticeable between any of the blocks, so nicely joined were they to begin with, was invisible. Moreover, I thought I felt a suspicion of a draft against my hands and at my ankles. Following the sort of hunch that has, in more momentous circumstances, changed the course of history, I placed my hand flat against the block and pushed.

"Nicholas," I cried *sotto voce*, "come here." A large single block, faced to look like two ordinary ones, slid slowly back under the pressure of my hand, and with a slight scraping against the rough-hewn floor, revealed that another tunnel behind it led off toward what I realized at once must be the back of the house. As the section of wall came open under my hand, a strong draft of air blew past me into the tunnel at my back. I looked over my shoulder and saw Nicholas shiver involuntarily under its chill blast.

"Another one," he whispered, coming up behind me and holding his lamp past me into the dark recesses ahead. It had a lower ceiling than the first tunnel, barely permitting a person of my height to stand upright. Nicholas, in fact, would have had to crouch for its entire length. Unlike the tunnel behind us, it was rough-hewn from the living rock as well.

"Dammit, I suppose that we had better make a detour and explore it. Maybe the treasure is down this way, after all," Nicholas growled, annoyed that his eager momentum had been checked just when he had begun to think things so simple.

"I don't think there is any need right now," I assured him. "It doesn't actually confuse things as much as you might think. In fact, it explains why we didn't find Hannibal Ling cowering from us in the dead-end tunnel when we explored it earlier."

"True, and since I assume this must lead back inland . . ."

"The bell tower," I suggested.

"Exactly! The day that Miss Paget fainted at the sight of him in the garden, the boy fled into the tower and disappeared. I didn't choose to go after him, but if I had done so, I'd have found him inexplicably vanished, I expect."

"Yes, gone in a puff of smoke, like the genie of which he always reminds me. It must have been Hannibal who rang the bell in the tower when Owen was killed. Remember? The bell stopped knelling, we paused in surprise, and then ran in at once. Only Owen was there. Hannibal Ling had escaped again, through this very tunnel."

"Damn him to Hades. I'll kill him when I find him, Mrs. Ling or no Mrs. Ling."

"I won't say you nay, Nicholas. If he's killed Owen, I shall want revenge every bit as much as you."

"If he's killed Owen!" he snorted. "Come on, Deirdre, let's go back and see where that supposed dead end leads and leave this till another day." Nicholas turned and began retracting his steps, leaving me with a wide-open entrance to a supposedly secret tunnel. There was no handhold, no ring or latch, and I could not make the block budge. The only way I could see to close it was simply to push from the other side, thus locking myself in the other tunnel.

"Come on," Nicholas whispered impatiently down the silent, dark little corridor.

"How do I close the bloody thing?" I cried out to him in sheer frustration.

"Not so clever as you think, are you, miss?" Nicholas chided as he came back toward me and with one hand pushed the stone back into place, where it was once more virtually undetectable.

"How did you do that?" I asked in admiration.

"Magic."

"No, really?"

"The stone works on a pivot," he explained. "You applied pressure to the left-hand side, and it opened. I applied pressure to the right side, and it closed."

"A mere bagatelle," I said with a snap of my fingers.

"Yes, we're clever, we Chinese. Now, do let's get on with it, shall we?"

In another minute or two we were back in the long, narrow cul-de-sac that ran under the front of the house. Nicholas paced off the length of the passage and made a rough estimate of the location of the lions. Then we each took the section of wall corresponding to one of them, he the left-hand side with the tunnel entrance on his left, and I the right-hand one on the blind end of the passage. Tracing the edges of each individual block in the prescribed area with fingers and

lantern beam, we each managed to hit upon what we sought at virtually the same time.

"Eureka," I cried out as a seeming pair of blocks gave way as one under my hand.

"Me too," he whispered conspiratorially, looking down the length of the wall at me with a grin of delight. There was barely enough illumination in the tunnel to see the twenty or so feet to his face, but even in the scant light I could make out the bright glitter of his dark eyes and his broad smile as he bared his white teeth.

Each of us discovered our own set of steep, rough-hewn steps carved out of living rock. Each set of steps led directly upward into the very bodies of the great bronze lions themselves. In the interior of each was a tiny wooden bench or platform that was wedged securely into place in the chest cavity of the beast, affording the lookout—necessarily a small man, by virtue of the exceedingly cramped space inside—a perch that enabled him to raise his head into the head of the lion itself and, as I had surmised, look out through the crystal eyes to the expanse of the bay before him. Even now, through those very eyes, which had evidently not been cleaned since Hannibal Cheng's day, I could make out the flickering light of the lanterns that flanked the gate leading to the courtyard of the house. In the daytime, there would be almost enough light within the lions by which to read, I imagined.

"Fine, they really are lookout posts," Nicholas whispered up the steps to me as I backed out and joined him again in the cul-de-sac. "Now, how do they guard the treasure? Where is the next clue?"

"We already have it. 'The lion have paw,'" I quoted.

"Then I expect I already have the answer, too. When I was investigating the inside of my lion, I noticed that the paw that rests on the crystal moon has a large rivet in it. I assumed that it was just the pin that holds the ball in its place outside, but if it also turns or moves in some fashion, then it may operate some mechanism in the wall along here, another pivot perhaps." Nicholas was back at the steps leading up to the interior of his own pet lion in a trice.

I crept back up the tiny, narrow stairway and aimed the beam of my lantern under the wooden platform and downward into the hollow bronze left-hand paw of the beast. Sure enough, protruding from the base of the paw was a large rivet or pin with a knoblike top.

I tried turning it, but since it was merely a knob and not a true handle, I could not seem to get sufficient purchase on it to budge the thing.

From behind me in the blackness I heard a cry of triumphant glee. Nicholas, damn him, had met with success already. It was stuffy in the oppressive, confined space, and I began to perspire as I endeavored more and more impatiently to turn the unyielding bronze pin.

"Having trouble?" Nicholas gloated from the foot of the steps.

"You know I am! What happened back there? Did you get anything to move?"

"You know I did!" he answered smugly. "There is another passageway."

"I thought there must be. What are we waiting for, then? Let's go."

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"Because, Deirdre, only Colonel Tom Thumb or little Hannibal Ling could get through the opening as it is now. You have the mechanism that opens it the rest of the way in your lion."

"The pin won't budge, I tell you." I was struggling with all my might and getting angrier by the minute.

"What an impatient creature you are, and so temperamental, too," he mused calmly. Now that we were on the very threshold of discovery, he was patient and in command of himself, savoring every delayed minute like a gourmet sniffing the aroma before tasting the sauce. If he could behave so, then I too would collect my wits and calm my jangled nerves. I gave up altogether on the recalcitrant rivet, and turning around to face Nicholas, sat coolly down upon the top step. Looking down the steep stairs at him, I smiled at his chagrin.

"Are you giving up?" he asked in surprise.

"No, just resting. After all, the treasure, if it is still here, has been here for some hundreds of years. It can wait a bit longer, don't you think?"

"If it is still here? Of course it is. You are wearing part of it now, in fact, are you not?" he added, gesturing to the gold bracelet I still wore on my right wrist.

"Indeed I am. I had forgot," and so I took a moment to examine the jewelry in the light of my lantern. "It matches the ring," I said, looking at the green jade dragon's head bearing a pearl in its jaws. It was set in the wide gold-mesh

bracelet, even as the small jade dragon's head was set in the bezel of the ring in my pocket.

"Your Lady of the Dragon, Deirdre; did she wear such jewelry in your visions of her? Does it match the necklace she wears?"

"No, it doesn't, Nicholas. It's nothing like. Far inferior in design, and even in quality, though if I hadn't seen the Dragon of the Moon, I would say that this was the finest, loveliest jewel that I had ever seen. The necklace that she wears is sublime—like nothing that I could ever have imagined. But then, she herself is sublime. You know, you promised to tell me who she was—or is—this afternoon, and you haven't yet. Don't you think that you had better do so now?" I coaxed softly.

And like one telling a fairy tale, Nicholas told me the story of my Lady of the Dragon at last.

"The necklace was a gift from her emperor upon their marriage," he began. "At least, that is the tradition that is handed down in the family history. It was called the Dragon of the Moon and was famed throughout China for its unsurpassed beauty. It was probably for this reason that the Moon-dragon became the emblem of her descendants. She herself was called by the name Ywe Liang Jenju—Moon Pearl. She was the daughter of a minor noble of the court of Shen Tsung, and was only fifteen when the emperor saw her and fell in love with her. He was an old man, and though he had many wives and children, it was she who was his greatest love. She bore him two sons, but never lived to see them reach manhood. She was dead within a few years and was buried with great ceremony and lamentation.

"Two generations later, when the Ming dynasty fell and Ming resistors were being executed by the Manchus, my ancestors, Cheng Chih-lung, and his son, Cheng Ch'engkung I, went to Peking and stole the body of the Lady Moon Pearl from the royal burial chambers, lest it be despoiled and destroyed along with the bodies of the other Ming dead.

"Cheng Chih-lung was captured and executed. His son escaped and spent the rest of his life revenging his father's death at the hands of the Manchus by harassing their trade, terrorizing the coast, and committing acts of piracy against them and the European powers that traded with them. It was he who began to accumulate the fortune that has made us wealthy to this day; his is the treasure that we seek tonight."

"It was him the Portuguese called Koxinga, wasn't it? But what became of the body of the Lady Moon Pearl?" I asked.

"No one knows, though it is unlikely that they were actually able to get the body out of Peking to begin with. Tradition has always maintained, however, that she became the guardian and protectress of our fortunes, just as she had been the foundress of our line."

"Knowing all that, why did you not realize that it was she who must be appearing to people here in the house—the old cook, my mother, even poor Hannibal Ling himself?" I asked.

"I knew, of course, that a few people had seen the ghost of a Chinese lady here at Moondragon over the years, but since I have never believed in ghosts, I gave the stories no credence whatsoever. After all, with the profusion of paintings and statues of oriental ladies in this house, was it any wonder that active imaginations would conjure up similar visions in the form of 'ghosts'? There was nothing in that!"

"I didn't even pay any attention to your own claims until you mentioned the necklace, calling it the Dragon of the Moon, and her 'your Lady of the Dragon.' Then I knew that the 'ghost' was real—or at least that the one you were seeing was real. You see, you as an outsider would have had no way of knowing about Ywe Liang Jenju and the Dragon of the Moon necklace. As far as I know, even my mother and Owen had no real knowledge of her. Owen was sick to death of Cheng family history and had never read Sir Hannibal's book, and my mother read it so long ago—probably even before I was born—that she had forgotten the old tales of the guardian ancestress. Evidently you were quite right that she was trying to reveal herself to someone in the house after my father and grandfather died, taking the secret of the Cheng treasure with them. By some miracle she was finally able to make contact and try to tell someone—you—about the fortune that her spirit guards."

"The treasure that her spirit guards," I mused. "Does it not occur to you that she must be very, very tired, Nicholas? Why must she be compelled to guard it? Perhaps she longs for a release, an end to duty. I feel sorry for her, you know. And she for me, I sense, and it puzzles me sometimes, almost frightens me. There is, upon occasion, such a look of sorrow and pity and compassion in her eyes—as if she saw beyond me, beyond us all, into the uncertain darkness of the future. If that is what she is doing—seeing beyond now—into what

lies ahead, what a terrible burden she bears. I think that if I could wish something for anyone in this world, I would wish a happy release for"—and here, stumbling slightly over the unfamiliar words, I said her name for the first time in her own tongue—"for Ywe Liang Jenju."

"Mei Ywe Liang Jenju," Nicholas whispered almost as an invocation. "'Mei' means 'beautiful.' She must have been truly *Mei*, I imagine."

"She is," I answered.

"How fortunate you are to be able to see her. She is our ancestress and our guardian spirit, yet we Chungs have never seen her. Only you have. I envy you. I ought almost to resent you, but somehow I don't at all. There is some reason for all this, some bond between you and the Lady Moon Pearl, and I cannot question it. I must simply accept it."

"We are going to find the treasure, Nicholas. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," he said quietly.

"We shall find more than the treasure," I whispered, wishing to prepare him.

"We damned well better find Owen's murderer. I'm going to skin that boy—not for my sake, or even for poor Owen's—but for my mother's sake alone. She really loved him, you know, weak as he was."

"I know that she loved him," I said impatiently. "You still don't see, do you? The nightmares . . . But of course! You refused to hear a description of my recurring nightmare. Owen realized its meaning even before I did. You don't know anything about it at all, so you cannot see what I see, know what it is that I now know."

"Woman, you talk in riddles."

"Man, man, we are living a riddle." I sighed and shook my head. A wave of great sorrow washed over me, and though I struggled against it as a swimmer struggles against the tide, it carried the moment and I found myself lost. Tears welled in my eyes, and I sat in a terrible loneliness upon the cold stone step, the great hollow of the brazen lion hovering above me like an omen. A shiver went through me, and the lamp wavered in my hand, its light swinging crazily about the steep narrow steps and dark cavity above.

Nicholas clambered up the steps and brushed the hair from my face, stroking me with surprising tenderness as he did. He leaned forward and rested my face against his shoulder,

pressing me to him gently. "Poor Deirdre, this has all been very hard on you, hasn't it? Dreams, nightmares, ghosts and family secrets, Owen's murder—so much. It's no wonder you are bowing under the strain. Shall I take you back to your room?"

"Take me back?" I pulled away and rubbed my tear-streaked, tired eyes. "Not for all the tea in . . . Nor for anything," I amended, and rose from my seat so hastily that I banged my head on the wooden seat above me and very nearly precipitated Nicholas backward down the steps. I turned into the confined space of the lion's haunches and leaned down into the paw despite the fact that my lantern was still on the step below me and afforded little help at all. Groping angrily, my temper aroused by the very idea that he thought I was "bowing" under any strain whatsoever, I took hold of the knob and gave it a vicious yank in sheer pique. Somewhere below me and within the wall to my left there was a grinding of gears and scraping of stone on stone. Nicholas gave a cry and called up the steps to me, "Good girl, you've done it. Come on." He stood at the foot of the steps, with both lanterns held before him to light my way back down into the tunnel. When I was beside him again, he gave me back my lamp, and gesturing with his own, pointed out the opening that now appeared in the center of the long wall between the steps leading to the guardian lions.

It was about four feet high by two wide and was the size of two small blocks of the wall. "My lion opens the bottom block to the left. Yours opens the top block to the right," Nicholas explained. "I didn't even shine my light inside. Thought we ought to do it together."

"That was thoughtful, Nicholas."

"God knows what's in there," he whispered, leaning back against the wall, with his eyes riveted to the passageway. "What kind of treasure would pirates have accumulated in those days and in those waters? I cannot even begin to imagine."

"Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl./ Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels," I quoted.

Nicholas' eyes were alight at the romantic images that the Bard's words conjured. Still he made no move toward the tunnel that I knew led to the treasure. "The Moondragon may be in there. Her body can't have survived a trip from Peking to Taiwan, but they'd have brought the Dragon of the

Moon with them, surely. If it is, Deirdre, my bride shall wear it on her wedding night, I swear."

I swore too, under my breath, at the very idea of that stupid, simpering English bitch wearing the Dragon of the Moon around her Sassenach throat "unless it strangles her," I muttered, not realizing that I spoke my thoughts aloud.

"What's that?" Nicholas asked, coming out of his reverie.

"Nothing. Hadn't we better get on with it?"

"Yes, at once." He leaped to attention, and crouching low, swung his lantern into the opening. Looking over his shoulder, I could see that we were faced, like a pair of poor, weary Arab tomb robbers, with yet another passageway. I sighed in resignation.

"Where do you suppose this one leads?" he asked. "Into the bay?"

"No," I answered in all seriousness. "No drafts, you see. It seems far too stuffy to lead anywhere outside."

"I'm beginning to think that it leads to China, myself. Maybe the treasure really is on Taiwan, after all." Nicholas laughed.

"In that case, we will need an extra ball of crochet cotton," I retorted. "China is a very long way from here."

"A very long, stout rope, rather. China is a long way from here, Deirdre, but more or less straight down." He grinned back over his shoulder at me and crawled into the opening. I followed at once, before he could try again to send me back upstairs.

We could barely stand up in the passage that lay ahead of us, but since it went on for only a few feet—no more than a dozen, in fact—before it ended in another blank wall, we were in no great discomfort.

"What do we do now? Push?" I asked.

"No, pull, rather," Nicholas answered, and shone his lantern up over our heads. "Look."

In the upper corner on either side of the passage was a large iron ring recessed into the granite, and because of its dark color, almost invisible to the careless eye. We set down our lanterns and each took hold of one of the rings; after a nod from Nicholas, we both pulled as hard as we could upon them. Of a sudden, the entire end of the narrow tunnel, a stone some five feet high by two feet wide, rose slowly but steadily, with a scraping and rumbling that struck a peculiarly familiar note in my consciousness. That very sound had come

to me in my dreams on more than one occasion. Had I merely dreamed of it, or had I actually heard it in the night? There was no time to speculate.

It truly was a treasure chamber that lay before us—a room some fifteen feet square, with a ceiling no more than seven feet high—packed with chests and boxes and woven bamboo baskets. Heaps of bronze and iron weapons lay against the walls or stood in corners. Against one wall were piled ingots of solid gold stamped with the marks of long-ago Dutch stadholders, Portuguese kings, and private trading companies. Bars and bars of silver bullion, black with age, were stacked like bricks in another corner. Against one wall a chest had rotted away to nothing, leaving in its place a disordered mass of coins and jewels and plate, crucifixes and scattered pearls whose strings had dried and decayed away with the long years in the cavelike room.

Beside me, just near the entrance, was an open chest filled with antique weapons, bright green bronze swords like the one whose blade had sent poor Owen on his way west. But all that stood piled around the walls of that chamber was as nothing to the splendor of what rested within the center of the tomb—for tomb it actually was, as much as treasure chamber.

She lay upon her bier, a slab of cold granite upon which she was stretched, even as I myself had been stretched in my dreadful nightmares. Above her was that oppressive, rough-hewn stone roof that pressed down in the blackness like an implacable doom. Her once raven black hair was dull and dry as dust, her fleshless skull covered with dark brown parchment where once ivory velvet skin had been. Her tiny hands still lay upon her breast, but now the bones of her fingers and their adornment of golden claws and rings were scattered and strewn along the length of her body. Her robe was a shapeless blanket of deteriorated gold and silver cloth, the slippers no more than lumps of blackened threads peeping from the hem of her ruined garments. Ironically, the trappings of splendor and tribute that surrounded this poor humble heap of mortal clay were still bright and beautiful in their hard, metallic, lifeless way. All around the base of the bier were boxes and mirrors of polished gold, golden urns and vases, toilet articles and jewels, and offerings without end to this corpse that had once been a living, loving woman. At each corner of the bier stood a tall candlestick of solid

gold and cloisonné in the form of a twisting dragon. They stood balanced on their hind claws and tails; each bore in one foreclaw a golden ball set with garnets and peridots and pearls, while the other, upraised to form a socket, held a massive dusty white taper. The blackened wicks and sooty ceiling above them testified to the fact that long ago they had been wont to be burned.

Her power and strength were fading I could tell, for once my Lady of the Dragon had been to me as solid and real as a living human being. Now, as she beckoned to me from the far side of her own dry, dead form stretched out upon the bier, her vision was as thin and unsubstantial as a mirage or the quivering heat waves of a burning summer's day. She made a poignant, mute appeal and dissolved before my eyes. Knowing now what I must do, I set down my lantern and approached the tall golden dragons with their dusty tapers held high. Slowly, with as much solemnity as such a ceremony must warrant, I lit the four massive candles that surrounded her pathetic little remains. Nicholas took his eyes away from her to watch me for a moment, and then he called softly across the candlelit tomb, "Thank you, Deirdre. That is most kind, most proper." He set down his own lantern and approached her body with great respect, whispering her name as he came near, "Reverend ancestress, Lady Moon Pearl, Ywe Liang Jenju, Mei Ywe Liang Jenju."

He stood before her dried, desiccated body with tears in his long, dark eyes. "Oh, Deirdre, if only I might see her as you have seen her—as she really was, as her emperor saw her."

I wanted so badly to give him that one thing that he asked, for I knew that there was not much more time. The end was approaching rapidly. Stepping around the far side of the bier, I came up beside him. "I don't know if it will work, Nicholas, but perhaps the links will be strong enough." I slipped the ring out of my pocket and onto his little finger. It was so tiny that it went barely halfway to the joint, but there at least it fit snugly.

"The ring was hers. See how the bones of her fingers were scattered when the boy stole it? The bracelet I wear was hers. Hold my hand, and watch her, Nicholas," I whispered, praying that between us, between the Lady Moon Pearl and myself, the link might still be strong enough to enable me to share my vision of her—perhaps, I sensed almost instinc-

tively, my very last vision of her—with this man, son of her sons, the last of her blood, the hope of her line.

With his broad hand held in mine, the finger bearing her ring just touching the gold bracelet on my wrist—a bracelet that she had worn in life and in death—I drew a deep breath, steeling myself to touch the pitiful heap of dried skin and bones that had been my Lady of the Dragon.

Extending my trembling left hand to her poor blackened cheek, I whispered her name in her own tongue. “Ywe Liang Jenju, Mei Ywe Liang Jenju, my dear Lady of the Dragon, for so you will always be to me,” I supplicated, tears streaming from my eyes. Then, through those tears I saw her lying upon the slab. No longer was her gown a shapeless blanket of gold and blackened silver threads studded with dull, round pebbles. Rather it was a glittering robe, vibrant with freshness and beauty, richly brocaded and embroidered, set lavishly with crude-cut gems of all colors. Her tiny feet were encased in embroidered golden slippers; her hands of palest ivory were laden with many rings, the tips of each slender finger encased in a long, bejeweled golden claw. Her hair was as glossy and black as a horse’s mane, her face as pale and lovely as the full moon, with arched black brows and softly gleaming, depthless onyx eyes that looked up at me from her peaceful, radiant face with such warmth and pity and compassion in them that my own eyes could hardly bear the sight. She smiled a small and tender smile with those perfect coral lips and nodded to me with the air of one bestowing a blessing.

No part of her had moved, save her exquisite face, but now, as if with one last great effort of both her will and mine, she lifted her delicate right hand, which lay crossed over her left upon her heart, and extended it toward our own two right hands, Nicholas’ and mine, where they held fast to each other at the edge of her cold stone bier. Her touch, lighter than the breath that wafts a feather, seemed to pass across our locked fingers for a solitary moment, and then her hand returned to its place—or rather, the place where Hannibal Ling had left its scattered remains—for, with not a second’s warning, her fair vision had faded from my sight, and the Lady Moon Pearl was once again no more than the bones and dust that she had been these three hundred years.

“Did you . . . ?”

“I saw her, Deirdre. Yes, thank you. I did see her,” Nicho-

las whispered, tears streaming down his dark, honey-toned cheeks. Releasing my hand, he moved another step forward and knelt at the side of her bier, speaking softly and tenderly to her pitiful corpse in her own tongue. I turned away and left him alone with her, for I knew that he was praying.

The Last Act; the Final Scene

The play is done; the curtain drops,
Slow falling to the prompter's bell.
—William Makepeace Thackeray

I sensed it coming before it came, perhaps as a wild creature senses the rain on the wind or the scent of man in the air. Or maybe even then I was beginning to take up the task that was destined to be mine. To this very day I do not really know, although there will come a time when I do—whether I will or no.

"Nicholas," I whispered urgently, loath to rouse him from his reverie at the bier of his ancestress, yet knowing that I must, if we were to be prepared. He looked up at me inquiringly, but there was no need for me to speak; we both saw and felt it at the same moment. A great rush of chilled air blew through the narrow opening into the chamber and whirled around the room like a cold blast from the arctic.

Just before the four tall tapers arranged around the bier flickered and guttered out in the blowing draft, we had a last glimpse of the Lady Moon Pearl. Then, like the light that had illumined her these last few minutes, she was no more. It may have been that sudden draft, the accompanying drop in temperature, or just the fresh dampness of the air that wafted so forcefully through the tomb after so many years of stillness, but whatever the cause, the effect was the same. Her dried flesh, the hair upon her head, the very bones of her skull, became one swirling, eddying column of dust that was borne for a second on the moving air and then scattered like the spores of a puffball throughout the darkening chamber.

We had no leisure to reflect upon this final dissolution of

her poor clay, but rather had to scramble for the lanterns where they rested on the floor near the bier, and pull back out of sight against the wall to the left of the opening. The draft had subsided, and whoever it was that had opened the secret entrance that led from the bell tower must now be approaching the treasure chamber itself. We closed the panels on our dark lanterns and waited in the pitch blackness as the intruder came near. Only the faintest sound of scuffling came to our ears, and that from far off. It seemed that we waited forever, Nicholas tense and at the alert, one hand holding his lamp, the other gripping the gun that still rested in his trousers pocket. I stood on his left, my eyes fascinated by the tiny pinpoints of light that glowed at the corner joinings of the lantern in my hand.

Then suddenly the sounds of shuffling feet were closer, and accompanied by an angry whispering in a tongue I knew to be Chinese. I leaned past Nicholas' form, a blacker shape in the blackness of the chamber, and fixed my eyes upon the spot where I knew the opening to be. At first all I saw was a tiny constellation of red stars, the retained vision of the pinpoints of lantern light upon which my sights had been fixed. Gradually, however, my eyes reaccustomed themselves to the dark, and I could make out a faint moving light coming from somewhere in the passage that led to the room where we waited so tensely. My companion shifted, drawing in his breath. The light grew closer and stronger, became a steady breath that penetrated the room itself. There was a flash of scarlet taffeta, and I knew all. Everything fell into place—all that I had dreamed, all that I had suspected, all was clear.

Nicholas waited, still not knowing who she was, until the figure in red—whose face was not illuminated by the beam of her lantern—had come all the way into the room before he threw open the shutter on his own lamp and cast the rays across her startled form. The boy whom she dragged by the wrist behind her whimpered and cowered in the lamplight, and finally, after struggling from her grasp, ran back through the portal and disappeared down the dark passageway.

Mrs. Ling cried out in anger and turned as if to follow him. Nicholas spoke sharply in Chinese, and she checked herself at once, turned, stood erect, and faced him with all the imperious dignity she was wont to have.

By this time my own lantern was unshuttered, and contributed also to the light in the tomb. Slipping from my place beside Nicholas, I once more circled the bier, now bereft of

its human remains, and lit again with the matches in my pocket the tall wax tapers around it. Setting my lamp upon a chest against the far wall, I stood regarding the scene before me with the detachment of an actor who, having played his own small part, stands in the wings and watches the scene continue upon the stage that he has just left.

Each of them held his lantern upon the face of the other, as if each knew the other to be the intruder. I surveyed Mrs. Ling with fascination as the two of them sought to outface each other. She was dressed in a fashionable if gaudy Paris gown of scarlet taffeta, form-fitting and cut low in the bodice, revealing that for all her nearly sixty years, she was a woman of remarkable physical attractions. Her hair, though still in the severe, knotted style that she always affected, was dressed with diamond clips, her neck and wrists swathed in similar glittering stones that sent tiny flecks of white light dancing about the walls and ceiling of the rough-hewn stone chamber. The effect reminded me of the golden glints that had reflected off the brass-and-gilt trimmings on Owen's scarlet uniform that night in the nursery. I had had a presentiment of evil then, shivering involuntarily at the sight of the bloodred tunic, and even now I knew what lay ahead: "who else must be let blood, who else is rank." My heart hardened in my breast as I continued to regard her. Her nails, too, long as daggers, were stained a bloodred, but most bizarre of all, her blind eye was covered by a scarlet patch tied around her head with a long ribbon that ended in the very diamond drop-lets that Gusty Paget had described in his letter to me.

Nicholas said not a word, but I could see the spots of color on his broad cheeks, the pulsing of his temples, the convulsive twitch of his hand upon the gun concealed in his pocket. They eyed each other as adversaries and equals, but I sensed that he was too taken aback by the very presence of her in the chamber, let alone the strange picture she presented in her flamboyant scarlet gown and dazzling jewels, to have full command of himself. Silence, under the circumstances, was his best recourse, and wisely, he chose it.

It was Mrs. Ling, not entirely in command herself either, who broke the unbearable tension mounting in the oppressive, stone-bound little room. "We stand, Sir Nicholas Cheng, in the treasure chamber of our ancestors." Her words were cool and matter-of-fact, but her voice trembled ever so slightly. Whatever she had expected to find this night in this place, she had not expected to confront this man.

"Our ancestors, Mrs. Ling? What blood of yours makes you dare to speak so? You were bought with a few coins, and your birthright is a piece of paper in a lawyer's legal jargon." He spoke with an icy, forbidding formality that would have withered the very soul of a lesser woman than Mrs. Ling.

"So the story goes, nephew. What a fine, magnanimous man was old Sir Hannibal Cheng"—she smiled ironically—"to have taken pity on a nameless, half-blind girl child, to have bought her and brought her all the way back from China to raise her as his own. What fools you all have been. Did it never occur to anyone to wonder why he should have behaved so? He knew China well, knew how many valueless infants were sold as slaves or even left to die. Why should he have pitied any of them? Why one? And if one, why only one?

"No, Nicholas Cheng, I am of his own blood, and yours . . . and this"—here she waved her hand across the room, indicating with a gesture the treasure, which she had barely glanced at in all the minutes she had been in the room—"this is mine by right of birth."

He laughed contemptuously, in full command of himself now, and I could tell that he was beginning to dismiss her as a madwoman. Whatever else she was, I sensed that she was not to be dismissed so lightly.

"He was my father, and he loved me," she went on somewhat defensively, "as he loved my mother, who died giving me life. There is a box in my room which contains the papers that prove the story is true; the record of my birth in Shanghai, Kiangsu province, in 1825, together with the record of the marriage of Sir Hannibal Cheng, Bart., to a lady named Soo Mei Ling, daughter of a merchant of that city."

"Why did he not acknowledge you? Or his marriage? Why go through the charade of an adoption? He was a widower by 1819, and therefore free to marry, free to acknowledge a wife and children." Nicholas' questions carried a note of genuine curiosity as well as challenge in them. I could tell he was beginning to think that she might well be speaking the truth. I, for one, never doubted her. Whatever else she was, she was no liar.

"I do not know," she answered simply, her tone betraying that she had often asked herself the same questions. Then she went on more defiantly. "Perhaps because I was merely a girl child. Perhaps because I was so ugly in his sight that he was ashamed to own me as his blood. I do not know." Her voice

was soft now. The pride she felt in herself as the blood daughter of Sir Hannibal Cheng was mitigated by the pain of never having been acknowledged by him. That she had loved—even worshiped—the old man was obvious by her tone when she spoke of him; that he had chosen to hide from the world their true relationship was clearly an agony to her. It had turned whatever softness there might have been in her to stone, the heart within her to flint.

"He thought he had done enough for me—educated me, loved me, left me an inheritance and a place here in this house. But it wasn't enough—not for me. He loathed William, my weak, soft, gentle half-brother. 'He wants spirit,' the old man used to say, 'not like ye are, Mei Ling, me little one-eyed tigress. If ye'd been born a man, girl,' he used to say, 'I'd truly have had a son ta be proud of. Ye fought yer way out o' a dead woman's belly and lived when they said ye'd die. Ye saw when they said ye'd be blind, and even as a babe, ye hung on. Ye endured storms and rough seas and survived a voyage halfway around the earth, like the pirates that sired ye. If ye were me son, girl, ye'd be master o' Moon-dragon in me wake, and I'd drown William for the useless, weak-willed whelp that he be."

As she spoke, her voice taking on the tone and accent of a man long dead, I could see in her something that I had never noticed before. She was like—very like—the portrait of old Hannibal Cheng, but in a strange, elusive way: less in the cast of her features than in the expressions that flitted across them when she spoke in passion. Her mask of passiveness hid a great mobility of feature that betrayed more than anything else her resemblance to the Chengs. The imperious fire in her was the fire of Sir Hannibal, and even that of Nicholas himself. And now, as she spoke so hotly, her emotions greatly stirred, her cheeks colored, even as did Nicholas' own; her temples, too, throbbed. While her build was tall and slender and graceful, her features finer, more completely oriental, yet in her whole aspect I could now see what none had seen in all those years: this woman was truly a Cheng—blood of their blood and fiber of their fiber. Nicholas saw it too, I could tell, and grudgingly bowed to her claim.

"But you were not his son. My father was, and therefore I am master here."

"For as long as you live." Her voice was flat and cold and deadly.

"I'll live longer than you, Cheng Mei Ling," he challenged, the hand in his trousers pocket twitching ominously.

"Perhaps," she remarked coolly.

There was a gauntlet down between them now, and as I watched, I knew they each intended the duel to be to the death.

"Should you die, Nicholas Cheng, the papers in my possession prove that I am your heir, and my son the next baronet of the line."

"Your son." He laughed mockingly. "He's an idiot and a bastard to boot."

"Yes," she answered coldly. "He is both, but I have a . . . a friend who is prepared to claim that the boy is our lawfully begotten son, born in wedlock of a secret marriage that antedates the attack that I . . . endured. Papers can be had for a price—will be had for a price—to substantiate our claim. Wealth such as this"—and here she let her one beady, bird-like eye range greedily about the room for an instant—"can grease many a venal palm. With wealth such as this, I can buy some poor man's child for my daughter-in-law, and even the likes of young Hannibal, fourth Baronet Cheng, whose name will be changed by deed-poll to that of his grandfather, should be able produce the eventual fifth of the line, don't you think? He does have an interest in the ladies, doesn't he, Miss Fennora? Miss Paget would testify to that too, don't you think?" Her tone was mocking, and made me shudder, for I remembered a more humane sentiment expressed by this woman when she vowed that her son would never commit the same crime done by his "fathers," as she had so feelingly put it.

Hearing myself addressed thus, and so coldly, gave me a start. She roused my ire now, as she once had my sympathy. "An admirable plan of a dutiful mother, Cheng Mei Ling." I nodded sarcastically with a sardonic smirk. It was time that I became more than an onlooker. I came out of the wings, so to speak, and took the stage myself. The tone of my voice was not lost upon her, but whatever I had expected of her, the reply I received came as a surprise. She did not attack, haughty and imperious toward me as she was toward the man who was her nephew, but rather spoke to me softly, appealing to my woman's nature with a mother's voice and heart.

"My son is all that I have, Miss Fennora. Does it surprise you that I should wish to plan for his future? Is my duty to

him less because he is the way he is, the product of a rape perpetrated upon his mother by a herd of animals?" She looked at me with an unwonted softness in that one black eye of hers, and my mind went back once more to that morning, weeks earlier, when I had seen that same eye shed upon the bosom of my riding habit one crystal tear of shame and sorrow. The bond forged by that single tear still held firm for her, it seemed. At any rate, I could tell she still assumed so and meant to trade upon it yet, if "trade upon" was the right term. Some trace of womanly bond seemed still to hold between us.

"Is there any harm in him? His childish mind makes him prankish and mischievous as a monkey, I know, but is there any harm in him? Tonight he told me about this place . . ." Here she broke off abruptly and addressed herself to Nicholas. "Isn't it ironic, Nicholas, that all these years we have searched for clues together, you and I; you sailing the coasts of China and Taiwan, and I researching every old Ming and Manchu manuscript that we could find—and all the while the boy had been finding his way down here for years. He only discovered the entrance to the treasure chamber a few days ago, he swears, but if we had ever suspected that these tunnels existed, we would have found this room long ago. 'And a little child shall lead them,' " she said, laughing. "I have never set much store by the Christian Bible, but I find that bit of wisdom droll under the circumstances, don't you, nephew?"

Nicholas made no reply, and the atmosphere in the oppressive tomb became as icy as it had formerly been between the two. I broke in with a milder challenge of my own in an effort to distract them from their suddenly expressed but visibly deepening mutual hatred.

"You say, Cheng Mei Ling, that there is no harm in the boy. Do you know that he has at least twice been in my rooms at night when I slept?" I dared not even mention Owen, despite my suspicions.

"I know," she answered simply, "and still I say so. Can you not see that though he did come in upon you, that it was not to hurt you? He told me, confessed tonight in fact, what he had done. He only wanted to give you the jewels, to give gifts to the beautiful young woman he admires, and who, unlike most others, has been kind to him. He says you have never laughed at him or turned away or rebuffed him in disgust. He was only trying to repay you in his own way. He

would never have hurt you, but he was far too shy and afraid of you to try to give you his gifts face to face."

I felt myself coloring with shame at the disgust I had always felt for the ugly, pathetic creature who was Hannibal Ling. What sympathy and kindness I had shown him was more the product of my breeding and the dutiful Christian charity that I had been taught than out of any genuine, heartfelt concern for him as a human being. The revelation of the boy's pitiful gratitude and generosity toward me, witless though he was, was a reproach to my unfeeling disdain of him, and I felt no little remorse.

"I do not mean to blame you or embarrass you, Miss Fen-nora. I see what he is in the eyes of others and do not blame you for your natural feelings of revulsion toward him. I only ask that you understand him and pity the boy. Is he to be blamed for what he is?" Mrs. Ling was speaking softly again, and seemingly from the heart, appealing to me woman to woman.

"No, he is not to be blamed. Nor"—and here my voice hardened, even as I fought against the spell of her appeal and endeavored to steel my heart against her—"nor is he to be used, Cheng Mei Ling. Not even by his greedy mother and her ambitious, grudge-bearing paramour."

"Her paramour," Nicholas broke in. It had clearly never occurred to him that Mrs. Ling might have a lover. Somehow, even the bizarre and gaudy finery that she wore had not brought the possibility home to him.

She laughed derisively at him. "Does it surprise you, Nicholas? Do you think that I dress like this to sit alone in my rooms at night with my idiot son? Or that I wear scarlet and diamonds to explore the depths of Moondragon in the dead of night? Yes, I have a lover," she hissed, turning on us both with a strange defensive pride.

"Twenty years ago, I was still a young woman, but spotless and untouched; an innocent. No man of my own blood wanted me, ugly and 'evil' of eye as I was to such superstitious fools. More than that—my father had educated me above any man of my own blood, had given me wealth and taste beyond the reach of any man on this estate. I was fit only for a white man, but what white man would ever desire one such as I?"

"Then there came that night of nights, the night of terror when my son was conceived by his many fathers." Her words, spat out on the still, candlelit air, sent a shiver

through me, and once more I saw the scene, heard the sounds, even as I had on that morning in the coach house when I had chanced to touch the little mildewed pony trap. "Whatever else that night accomplished for me, did to me, it awakened me to the one thing in me that I had never suspected—my womanhood. It shamed me at first, innocent that I was, to know that I really wanted this secret, evil pleasure—the touch of man. I had to pretend shame when the boy came, but secretly I was proud within me to have borne him, to give him suck and know the pleasures it gives a woman to nurse her own son.

"It wasn't enough, though. I had been violated, and for that I still had to have my revenge. It was my honor and the honor of my blood that drove me to it. I had nursed the desire for it within me for all those months while I carried my son. I nursed it within me even as I held him at my breast. But when it became clear that the boy would never be right, that he had been born a half-wit, my fury knew no bounds. Whatever plans I had had in the past for punishing those seven devils, I knew then that there would be absolutely no mercy from me. I wanted to pluck the very hearts from their bodies—every one of them."

"That's very nearly what you did, isn't it, Cheng Mei Ling?" Nicholas commented quietly, with understanding and even a sort of admiration in his voice.

She ignored his remark and went on. "One by one they died, slowly and in agony, properly mutilated for their particular act of violence. You were only a boy then, Nicholas, but I am sure that you have since heard the stories."

"I have read the transcripts of the coroner's inquests, in fact. I don't suppose there was a man in these parts who didn't know where the 'person or persons unknown' could be found. The name of Cheng and the foul nature of the original crime are all that saved you." He spoke very matter-of-factly, as if the taking of the law into her own bloody hands had been her right. "I should have known that you were a Cheng, if only by the very nature of your revenge. You are right, lady. You are a fitting descendant of pirates, a true daughter of Sir Hannibal Cheng."

She nodded proudly to him in acknowledgment of his compliment, which was no idle one, but meant with great sincerity. She could not resist temptation, however, and had to challenge him now, once she had won from him his praise.

"It was not only the name of Cheng that saved me, Sir

Nicholas. There was another name—powerful as your own—that was used to aid me in my escape from punishment for my most justifiable revenge." She paused, holding back the revelation of the hated name for dramatic effect.

"Adrigole, wasn't it?" I drawled casually, bent on denying her and her small triumph.

She snarled at me in surprise and anger, while Nicholas hissed audibly at the name.

"How came you each to discover in the other the perfect consort for your lusts and ambitions? Was it murder that united you, or merely the mutual desire to bring down your half-brother's son? Both perhaps?" My guesses hit home. She was angry now to have had her secret so easily prized by me.

"You claim to be a Cheng, and yet you ally yourself with the Whites of Adrigole? You let that man use you to bring down this house—our house? To loot the treasure of our common ancestors?" There was nothing of admiration in Nicholas' voice now; only cold disdain. "You fool."

"Am I? It may be that I am! Who knows?" She was cool again. She turned back to me and spoke levelly, endeavoring to explain and justify herself perhaps, but also to shock me, as if now that she had revealed them, she must boast of her shameful, worldly ways in order to reassure herself before another of her own sex.

"He came upon me one night along the shores of the inlet near Adrigole. I was reveling in tormenting the second of those who had been my tormentors, and he watched me. It excited him, he confessed to me later, even as it was exciting me to be doing what it was that I did. He came to me as I was finishing my work, and we finished it together, united from that moment on in a bond of blood and passion." Her voice was cold and insinuating and full of pride. She was reliving the grotesque scene even as she spoke, quiet madness lurking in that one bright, birdlike eye of hers.

"God, Deirdre, she's insane," Nicholas whispered. She seemed not to hear him.

I ignored his indiscreet remark and spoke to her instead, trying to confirm something that I suspected. "Whenever you had to go to England for Nicholas to research Chinese manuscripts in the British Museum library—"

"That has only been for the last five or six years, but it has been wonderful for us," she interrupted, answering my question before I had even had a chance to ask it. "He would arrange to get away, and we would live together in London.

We lived incognito, but nevertheless we lived as we could never live here—passionately and lavishly. But never lavishly enough for our tastes, and so we devised the plan to find the treasure for ourselves and to claim Moondragon for me and my son. Why, Nicholas, do you think I was so helpful to you? Out of generosity? Out of my loyalty to you?" She sneered at him contemptuously, and then went on. "We expected, even as you did, to have to sail to China eventually in order to find all this"—and here she once again surveyed all the gold and pearls and jewels scattered across the floor with that one hungry, greedy, bright eye—"but as it turned out, thanks to that poor fool Owen—I really rather liked him, you know—and my dear son, that journey is no longer necessary."

"And so you've allied yourself against your own blood with the likes of Arthur White, Earl of Adrigole? Are you fool enough, woman, to think that he'll actually marry you?" There was nothing but cold contempt now in Nicholas' voice.

"Do you think that he will not marry me, Nicholas Cheng?" Her question had an insinuating tone in it again.

"He's using you to get back at me. His people have hated us for generations. He'd do anything to ruin us, save risk his own life, coward that he is."

"You think he will not marry me, Nicholas?" she reiterated, evidently fascinated by the question. "You think that he is using me?" There was something in her tone that warned me to beware of her. There was something she was about to reveal. "I tell you this, nephew: he has every right to use me, and he uses me well!" She smirked triumphantly. "And you are right, he will not marry me. There is no need he should, for you see, we are already man and wife!" She spoke these last words in a whisper that was sharp and distinct upon the still air of the stone chamber.

"I am the Countess of Adrigole and have been for four years now. It will not take much more than a little gold in the right quarter to make this secret marriage appear to be one of many years' duration. My son will have a name and a birthright, and Arthur and I shall reign in your place at Moondragon. A pretty picture to have in your mind's eye as you go down to your death, Nicholas Cheng," she sneered at him contemptuously.

"Have a care, Countess," he spat back at her, fingering the gun in his right-hand pocket menacingly.

Sensing danger in the very stillness of that dreadful atmo-

sphere, I slid the poker out of my belt and held it firmly in my hand, concealing it in the folds of my dressing gown, even though it was still protected from Mrs. Ling's sight by the massive stone bier between us.

"Don't worry about a thing, *Mei Ling*, me pet. Oi've got the haughty Baronet Cheng quite well covered." The lilting Irish brogue of the Earl of Adrigole came echoing out of the dark passage that led back to the cul-de-sac. A beam of lantern light appeared, followed by the earl himself, dragging the whimpering form of Hannibal Ling along with him, even as Mrs. Ling had done herself only a short while before. The little rotund man was dressed in blue, just as he had been at the ball. I confirmed what I had known all along. The man I had seen in the shadows of the garden on that night, the man Owen had seen from time to time lurking about the house, was not, as he had suspected, Captain Isaac Vreeland, but actually the Earl of Adrigole.

"Get on in there, me boyo," he ordered, thrusting the poor creature ahead of him through the opening. Hannibal slunk behind his mother and cowered down beside the open box of antique weapons that rested by the entrance to the passageway. "Oi found the young scamp playin' about in the garden. When he saw me, he took off loike a rabbit, and into the bell tower. There were flags up out o' the floor, and steps leadin' down. Oi caught up with him there and dragged him along till Oi found you."

Mrs. Ling looked at him gratefully. By the relieved expression on her face, I knew that she had been expecting him momentarily and had been biding her time till his arrival. "The boy led me to this place just a while ago," she explained to him hastily. "I left the entrance open in hopes that you'd find it and follow. These two were here ahead of me."

"Oh, and were they now? Maybe it's them, then, that did for the so-called 'Captain' Sarsfield-Jones." The ruddy-faced, cherubic little man bent his head and came the rest of the way into the chamber as he spoke. Nicholas, standing on the earl's left as he entered, made a sudden move, but was checked by a wave of the large gun in his enemy's hand.

"Wisdom's the better part o' valor, me bucko," the older man warned mildly. "Do behave, for Oi'm a dandy shot with this piece, and at such close range, Oi'd make quite a mess out o' ya before yer lady friend's oiyes. Ya wouldn't want that, now, would ye, lad?" He turned his eyes on his wife. "Do ya think it was them, pet?" he asked again.

"No," she confessed, turning to Hannibal, who slunk farther into the shadows behind her. "I think it must have been the boy."

I looked beyond her at the creature cowering in the nook beside the old chest. He was mindless and pathetic. All thoughts of revenge left me. Owen had been killed for nothing, and by someone from whom nature herself had already extracted the most terrible revenge of all. The little earl grunted and waved his gun toward Nicholas with vague menace. Nicholas himself said nothing, but his color rose. He was containing his temper, but only because he had not got the upper hand. His gun, lodged as it was in his pocket, was as good as useless. There had to be some distraction in order that he might free it for use. I pressed closer to the bier, bent on keeping my poker out of sight. The Earl of Adrigole let his eyes roam around the little room. They glittered in appreciation of what he saw.

"Well, ain't this foine, now? It's been here at Moondragon all the while. That's quite a joke, ain't it, girl?" He laughed merrily, but stopped abruptly and with unctuous menace in his voice shot a warning at Nicholas, who had moved slightly. "Have a care, boyo. Oi'm not much concerned with killin' ye, but a gun goin' off in this stone room would make an awful racket, and Oi've such sensative ears, sa do spare me."

"Arthur, it was Hannibal that found the treasure for us." Mrs. Ling spoke up quickly, as if she herself wished to avoid the trouble that his voice threatened.

"Was it, now? That's a good boy, young master Hannibal. We shall have to see he has an extra good tea tomorrow, shan't we, pet?" He spoke glibly, with a patronizing tone that made me loathe him even more than I had when I had first heard him speaking to Gusty Paget on the night of the Moondragon ball. Something passed across the impassive face of Mrs. Ling that made me think he affected her in a similar way. She needed him, however. I suspected that she did not count on needing him for long. Distracted by the sights of splendor and wealth around him in the chamber, he circled the room with bright, greedy blue eyes that took in everything there was to see. The stacks of bullion particularly pleased him.

"Well, Mei Ling, it looks as if we're going to be very, very rich." He strolled around the bier with seeming casualness, his eyes taking in the golden candlesticks, the hoard of golden artifacts ranged around the base of the stone. "Oh,

we're going ta be very rich, my pet," he reiterated with a chortle of pleasure. "How much do they know of our plans?" he asked his wife, his eyes still greedily surveying the room.

"They know that I am your countess, that the boy will be the fourth baronet—"

He laughed jovially. "Ain't that a fittin' end ta the plaguey Chengs o' Moondragon, Sir Nicholas? Now, Oi ask ye, boyo, can ye think of a greater pleasure for me than ta see ya dead and Mei Ling's half-wit bastard ensconced here as the fourth baronet o' the loine? Why, it's even worth claimin' the poor creature's me own blood ta accomplish that bit o' knavery." There was a twinkle of pure malevolence in his clear, icy blue eyes.

"You can hear him speak this way of our name, Cheng Mei Ling, and still join him in his foul scheming?" Nicholas asked his aunt contemptuously. "Can't you see that he is the most sardonic, devilish troublemaker that's ever breathed? He'd lie and cheat and debase even himself to settle some ridiculous score with us and ours."

"Say on, boyo. Oi'm lovin' it all," the cherubic, rotund little man cried out heartily.

"You haven't said anything I do not know already, nephew," the woman in scarlet and diamonds answered, her voice as hard and metallic as the long green bronze poniard that she had picked out of the chest of weapons at her side. She held it before her and stroked it absently as she spoke. "And why should I have any great concern for the eventual fate of our house, our line? My father denied me my true name and my birthright, claiming to the world that I was merely an adopted foundling. He may have kept me from being recognized as a Cheng, but he could not keep me from being one of them. Like all of our blood, I take what I want—what is mine. Even when we lose, we lose well and valiantly, but when we win, we win ruthlessly and mercilessly. Am I not right, Nicholas Cheng?"

"Quite right, Countess," he agreed, smiling sardonically. Like him, I too detected that in reveling so proudly in her own heritage, she forgot that what held true for her was also true of the man she addressed.

"This man, my husband, and I are partners. Each of us in our own way desires the same thing, the destruction of William Cheng's line, your line, Sir Nicholas." I detected at once how carefully chosen were her words. "William Cheng's

line" she had said. Her own line, in the person of her son, she intended to go on.

"Aye, boyo, it's the way o' the world. She wants your end ta make way for her son and herself, and she'll have it, too. Oi want an end ta the Cheng family, and Oi'll have that—the last o' an ignoble loine a half-wit—and so end the haughty Chengs o' Bantry Bay." Here he laughed, his cherubic red face transformed into that of a debauched devil by the dim, flickering light of the crowded and oppressive little chamber. And suddenly I knew why Mrs. Ling's words had been so carefully chosen. She, unlike the earl, had no intention that the Cheng line end with her son. The subtle disparity, I detected, was not lost upon Nicholas, either.

"Why, Cheng Mei Ling," Nicholas chided in a smooth, oily tone so unlike his usual manner of speaking that it took me aback, "you haven't confided your hopes for an heir to him. Doesn't he know that you plan that young Hannibal make him a grandfather someday?"

"She's pullin' yer leg, son." The earl smiled benignly, moving past me slowly as he surveyed the closed boxes and chests along the wall behind me. Of all of us, he was the most distracted by the contents of the room and the untold wealth that it held.

"Just whose leg is it you are pulling, Cheng Mei Ling?" Nicholas asked. His voice was crafty.

She stood, silent and enigmatic, her face impassive, her figure exotic and almost gorgeously grotesque in its scarlet taffeta and masses of reflecting idamonds. If all went according to their plans and she was able to establish her son as the fourth Baronet Cheng, I had no need to wonder which of these two corrupt, greedy souls would gain the most and which would die first. I sensed that there was little honor between these thieves, but that the Earl of Adrigole, for all his conniving ways, was no match for the likes of his countess. He was the more naive of the two, I suspected, more a slave to his passions and hence more at the mercy of this bizarre and lustful woman who had been capable of masking her true character and inclinations from her own household for years and seemed herself to be at the mercy of nothing and no one.

I had kept silent for some time now, watching for an opportunity to help Nicholas gain the upper hand. Fortunately, the two of them, earl and countess together, were bent on their welling hatred of Nicholas and thought little of me. Nei-

ther of them seemed to realize that he had a gun in his pocket, though the earl was cautious enough to keep his own weapon at the ready and pointed more or less steadily at Nicholas as he circled the room.

Now he came around past me on my right, holding the gun in his left hand—for he was sinister in more ways than one—and stopped near the end of the bier. The gun was trained on his enemy now, and I could see that the finger moved restlessly on the trigger. It would not be long now, I knew. I shot a glance of warning at Nicholas and dared to move my right arm slightly against the bier, turning my eyes on the Earl of Adrigole's gun as I did. I hoped he understood me, for if he did not, the results of the action I was about to take might be disastrous. He saw my signal and looked coolly away toward the rigid and silent Mei Ling, Countess of Adrigole. I sensed that he understood me, and so I made my move.

Nicholas had, but an hour or so earlier, wished on my behalf that I might never have to strike a blow in anger. "Or if I must, may I strike well," I had retorted with a smile. Now I lashed out, striking that very blow, though not so much in anger as out of necessity and in cold, implacable hatred of the unctuous, loathsome little man who would destroy Sir Nicholas Cheng and end his line in ignominy.

I struck well and truly, smashing down with all my might against his arm. He dropped the gun with a cry of anguish as I raised the poker again and sent it down once more for good measure. The second blow landed on his left shoulder and across his neck, for he had doubled up in pain from the first. He went crashing to the floor in a clatter of overturning artifacts nestled around the base of the stone bier.

I turned my attention then to Nicholas, whose own gun was nowhere to be seen. Rather he was grappling hand to hand with Mrs. Ling, who fought him like a tigress, endeavoring by sheer will alone—for her physical strength could not begin to equal that of her nephew—to plunge the long green bronze poniard into his breast. The two were snarling like beasts and looked like a pair of Chinese demons in the dim, flickering light of the small, littered room.

Finally he overpowered her, thrusting her against the bier, where she crumpled, spent and out of breath. It was then that I saw what had happened as I attacked the earl.

Nicholas had turned toward us, pulling his own gun from his pocket as he did, but not in time to prevent his aunt from

lunging at him with the dagger. He had raised his right arm instinctively to ward off the blow, and it had received the point she had intended for his heart. The gun had dropped, and they had grappled wildly with each other.

Nicholas looked first at Adrigole, who was now barely conscious, and then at me, with admiration in his eyes, gasping out a few words of praise. "Marvelous woman! You've put him quite out of the picture." I handed him my poker with trembling hands, for I was beginning to feel the effects upon my nerves of that dreadful night, and stood back so he would have a clear view of both the earl and his countess.

"Are you all right, Nicholas?" I asked in alarm, for his white shirt, his right arm, and his hand were running red with blood. His gun, lying at his feet, was now in the center of an ever-widening pool of gore. "I've got to get you out of here and send for a doctor. What shall we do with these two?"

"Bind 'em up in your crochet cotton and hold 'em for the police." He grimaced, gasping with exhaustion and the increasing loss of blood.

"For God's sake, this is no laughing matter, Nicholas."

"I know, girl. Quiet. I'm thinking. Maybe you had better run and get Shi Fu and some of the servants. No, on second thought, I'm not sure I can hold these two at bay that long. Adrigole may come around."

"Can we back out and leave them locked in here while we—?"

"That's it! Clever girl." He said no more, for at that moment his eyes began to lose their focus, and I could see that he was about to black out.

"Nicholas," I cried out, and losing my head completely, ran toward him, trying to catch him in my arms as his knees buckled and he fell to the floor. Of the gun, I thought nothing, fool that I was.

Mrs. Ling let out a cry of triumph and leaped forward toward us. In her hand, which she held poised above me, she brandished the long green dagger, its point already red with the blood of Sir Nicholas Cheng. In a moment it would all be over, I thought in panic as I sought to ward off the blow I knew was coming.

We were sealed up in the small oppressive chamber, now with the stone in place behind us, but by the light of a dozen lanterns and the four great tapers ranged around the empty bier, it held few terrors for us now.

Nicholas' arm was bound up in a sling, and on the stone floor the pools of blood that had flowed from his wound had dried and were brown and innocuous to the sight. Only one thing in all the chamber still truly evoked the violence that had occurred within its walls, and that was, like the dried brown marks on the floor, a bloodstain.

The two of us stood before it for a minute, each thinking his own thoughts, but then Nicholas summed it up with a few quiet words! "Thank God, Deirdre, for poor Hannibal Ling."

"Yes." I nodded simply, and looked again at the single bloody handprint that marred the pristine side of the stone bier on which Moon Pearl—my Lady of the Dragon—had rested. It was not the boy's blood that had made that clear, perfect print on the stone, but rather his mother's, as, in her death agony, she had fallen and sought to turn herself to face and accuse the unnatural son who would strike down his own mother. It was to save me that he had struck out at her, for as she herself had said, I was the "beautiful young woman he admires and who, unlike most others, has been kind to him," And so it was that in his infatuation he came to repay my few careless words of kindness with his mother's blood, for, seeing her as she menaced me with the poniard, he seized a weapon from the box near which he had been crouching and came up behind her. Even as she raised the dagger to strike at me, he plunged a great, long two-handed broadsword into her back with such force that its blade came out through her chest, splattering us all with great gouts of her blood. She was long in dying, one hand clutched convulsively at the protruding blade. With the other she held herself off the floor. She sat down slowly on one hip directly in front of me as I watched transfixed. Her eyepatch had slipped, and I could see with revulsion that her blind eye was one pupilless scarlet membrane as red as were her gown and the weltering blood that pumped from her awful wound with every beat of her dying heart. Gradually, with an expression on her face that ran the gamut from shock and horror to dismay and disbelief, she was able to turn, steadying herself with one bloody hand against the bier; she looked up at her gibbering son. Then, with one last look of sorrow and reproach, she fell back against me, dead.

Hannibal, poor crazed boy, stood motionless the while with the enormity of what he had done, his mouth gaping and drooling. When he saw that she was dead, he seemed to realize the import of his act, for he let out a cry of pure misery

and ran from the room like the devil himself was after him. All the way through the long passages of the secret tunnels of Moondragon, I could hear the ever-receding echoes of his agonized and mournful cry of horror at what he had done. Both Nicholas and the Earl of Adrigole came to at about the same time, but while Nicholas looked upon the corpse of her who had been Cheng Mei Ling, his aunt, and Mrs. Ling, his housekeeper, with unconcealed delight, Arthur White, Earl of Adrigole, looked at the body of his wife, the Countess Mei Ling, in shock, and even, I could see, some genuine sorrow. He staggered up, oblivious that I now held his own gun on him, and with his smashed shoulder and arm hanging grotesquely, stood over his wife's body for a minute.

"It's all up with us now, isn't it, pet?" he whispered, and went past us toward the passage, as one in a daze.

"Stop where you are," I called after him, but he seemed not to hear me.

"Let him go, Deirdre," Nicholas said softly. "Can't you see he doesn't know what he's about? He's good for nothing as he is, and can't get far. I'll catch up with him later."

Nicholas was right, of course. And in the end, there had been no need to pursue him at all. The next morning some farmers found his body in a ditch a few miles from his seat. His horse grazed quietly nearby. It was thought that while out riding in the night, as was his habit, the Earl of Adrigole had had a heart attack and fallen from his mount, breaking his arm and shoulder in the process. He had died of exposure and as a result of his injuries. It was a convenient if not a wholly just end to one who had contemplated a far worse fate than that for Sir Nicholas Cheng.

I bound his arm and helped Nicholas back up into the library and summoned Shi Fu. Together we got him the rest of the way upstairs to his own rooms. A doctor was sent for, and while Nicholas waited his arrival under the care of some hastily roused servants, Shi Fu and I went back down into the secret recesses of Moondragon and carried Mrs. Ling out of the treasure chamber and into the cul-de-sac. I had the presence of mind to bring along with her body a number of antique weapons from the chest within the chamber and heap them in one corner of the tunnel near her body. Then, sending Shi Fu back upstairs so that he would not see the mechanisms that controlled the entrance to the treasure, I reclosed the room itself, the short passage leading to it, the openings of the two guardian lions, and the tunnel leading to

the bell tower. It was a frightening task, alone in the grim confines of those oppressive tunnels, but the necessity made me work with a will.

The next day, Sir Nicholas was sufficiently recovered to speak to the authorities from Bantry and explain how his housekeeper's imbecile son had found a cache of old weapons in a subterranean passage and had gone berserk, killing first his master's uncle, Captain Owen Sarsfield-Jones, and then his own mother, Cheng Mei Ling, known commonly as Mrs. Ling, Sir Nicholas himself had been wounded in a vain attempt to subdue the boy.

Hannibal Ling, whatever he had been before, was now totally mad. He lived for several days in and around the environs of the great house, eluding all efforts to capture him. On the day of his mother's funeral, however, the huge "death bell" in the tower rang again, not the constant, implacable knelling that had been rung for Owen, but rather two great peals followed by a crazily disordered jangle. By the time we reached the tower, the bell was still and Hannibal Ling's death struggles were over. He had hung himself by the rope of the huge bronze bell and now swung over the very spot where he had killed Owen. We deduced the sequence of events that had led to that tragedy by piecing together what little we knew and by the use of our reasoning powers, for none remained alive to tell the story. Owen must have found the treasure chamber that last night of his life and have emerged from the secret tunnel into the bell tower carrying the ancient Chinese sword as proof of his discovery. He had probably laid it down on the flagstone floor as he bent to replace the stones that concealed the steps. It must have been then that Hannibal Ling struck, killing Owen with the same kind of forceful two-handed blow that he had later used to slay his mother.

Thus it was that we came to stand side by side in the treasure chamber that had been the tomb of the Lady Moon Pearl, looking down at the bloody handprint that sullied and dishonored what had been that noble lady's last resting place.

"I ought to wash away that blood," I said.

"Why? She was as much a Cheng as any of her forebears. Her blood is here by right, as is mine," he said, scuffing his foot thoughtfully on the dried stain of his own blood upon the floor.

"Nicholas, she would have killed you," I protested.

"As I would have killed her if I had had the chance," he answered. "Hannibal beat me to it," he added simply.

We spent many an hour over the next several days in that silent stone chamber going through the many chests, boxes, and baskets that were piled about the walls, and though neither of us said anything about it, we were deeply disappointed when at the end of our searches we still had not found the Dragon of the Moon, which represented to each of us the greatest treasure of all. Of pearls there were countless thousands, but none like the Moon Pearl of my visions; of golden necklaces and jewels, there were scores, but none to match the matchless Moondragon. No single ornament, however priceless—and there were hundreds in the room—could satisfy the unspoken longing we both shared to see the Dragon of the Moon, which had been given to the Lady Ywe Liang Jenju by her emperor, Shen Tsung, to commemorate his love and to match her own unsurpassed beauty.

"It isn't here," Nicholas said at last, and had no need to elaborate; we both knew exactly what he meant.

"I was so sure it would be," I lamented.

"Dammit, it must be here. It has to be," he shouted in an excess of emotion. "I want it, I tell you."

"Yes," I agreed dryly, "your bride is going to wear it on her wedding night." A vision of the Honorable Victoria Paget wearing the Dragon of the Moon flashed before my eyes. Damn her, I thought, my gaze sweeping over the bier upon which my beautiful Lady of the Dragon had once rested. Only the long blanketlike and shapeless remnants of her deteriorated robe and slippers remained on the stone slab. The rings, claws, and one bracelet that had been on her fingers and wrist, we had found where they lay scattered upon it. Neither of us wished to disturb the clothing any further. After all, it was all that remained of the earthly being that had been the Lady Moon Pearl.

Looking sadly down upon those poor relics, I was moved to think back to that first time I had seen her—how she had come slowly and majestically across the square, gazed up at me and, opening the high neck of her golden robe, bared her throat and breast to show me . . .

"Nicholas," I cried. "It is here after all, in the one place that we have not disturbed. It lies within the neck of the robe she wore. It is right here before our very eyes."

Without a word, gently, and with reverence, Nicholas moved to the bier and parted the layers of cloth, to reveal,

untouched by time and corruption, the Moondragon itself. Neither of us could utter a word, but rather stared at it for a long moment, completely transfixed by its beauty.

It was of solid gold, each glittering scale a moving link, enameled in shades of palest to deepest blue. The head was minutely detailed and set with wickedly glittering ruby eyes; each of its four claws held in large, crudely cut but highly polished jewel. As Nicholas picked it up in his hands, the body of the cunningly wrought and wicked little beast writhed and twisted. So perfectly was it made that it moved as a living creature in his grasp. He carefully lifted it out of the dusty, crumbling folds of the robe, revealing, as he did, the Moon Pearl itself, a huge, rather elongated baroque pearl nearly three inches in diameter and of the most perfect, iridescent silvery whiteness imaginable. It seemed to me as I gazed upon it that no blending of the arts of man and nature could be more magnificent than the combination of that perfectly fashioned golden dragon and the glowing pearl that hung from its jaws.

"Can you think of a more wonderful wedding gift?" Nicholas asked.

"No," I answered through gritted teeth. It galled me to think of that venal, empty-headed fortune-hunter wearing the Moondragon, living in the great English country houses that the treasure would buy for her, ruining with her selfishness and greed a man who deserved so much more. I could not hold my tongue any longer.

"Well, Sir Nicholas, you have all you could desire now—the treasure, the necklace, and your bride. If all this can't buy her for you, then nothing can," I snapped peevishly.

"And what in God's name do you mean by that, girl?"

"Why, nothing, sir, nothing at all. Only, it must make you very happy to know that you have enough money now to buy the love of the Honorable Miss Paget. Why, there must be enough here to make her quite forget the Chinese in you, for a while at any rate. The more houses you can build for her, the more carriages she can have, the more Irish you'll seem to her, I'm sure. The trouble is, soon you'll have to pay her to forget you're Irish, too. In time, even that won't be good enough, you know."

"You bitch," he murmured.

"Do I offend you, Sir Nicholas? Pray forgive me. You know, it occurs to me that the Marlborough House set includes the Rothschilds, and the queen has bestowed a peerage

on Disraeli. Why, with any luck and a large enough donation of Chinese jades and manuscripts to the British Museum, the English may even overlook your bloodlines long enough to make you a peer. I'm sure the Honorable Victoria would adore to be the first Lady Moondragon, milord."

"What a nasty, evil-minded wench you are." He smiled. I was too angry by now not to continue, and he gave me my head with a funny gleam in his long, dark eyes.

"How can you care so for such a silly, selfish, vain, empty-headed, prejudiced little fortune-hunter as she? She doesn't care a pin for you, you know. But go ahead if you must; marry that venal English bitch and see what it gets you. I don't need the 'sight' to predict the future of that union." He said not a word.

"You'll get a sickly, pale English son off her, and maybe a daughter if she's generous, but then you'll find her more and more in London with her own 'set,' while you spend all your time here pining for her or else following her from country house to country house in England like a pet dog, and a damned quaint one, at that; half Pekingese and half Irish wolfhound. My God, man, you'll come to hate yourself."

"You bad-tempered, mean little vixen," he said mildly, still with that gleam, in his eye, "I'm nobody's pet dog, and you know it."

"No, you're not—not now—but how long do you think it will take? God, you're too fine a man, have too great a mind and spirit for such a match as that. Find someone who values you for what you are—for the Chinese in you as well as the Irish, for your blood and your brains and your manhood, not for this!" I shouted, waving my hand over the great fortune that lay heaped about the room.

"Why, even if you were as penniless as a pauper, you'd be worth all the dukes and earls and nobles of England to a woman who truly loved you. Dammit, men are such fools," I exclaimed, stamping my foot in sheer pique. But was it pique? Maybe it was selfishness on my part. I would miss this very devil of a man so much now that my reasons for being here at Moondragon were ending.

"Are you quite finished now, Deirdre?" he asked quietly, fingering the necklace in his hand thoughtfully.

"Quite, Sir Nicholas. There is really nothing more to say," I answered. My ire was spent, and I actually felt rather foolish for having spoken out so vehemently, but the very thought of the Honorable Miss Paget made me see red and lose all sense

of proportion and reason. She didn't deserve him! *She* didn't love him. She wouldn't care for him and understand his nature and his needs. Oh, damn her eyes!

"Well, you had better take this, you hot-tempered Irish witch, or there'll be no peace. It's yours, after all." And with those affectionate remarks, Sir Nicholas tossed the priceless Moondragon across the bier at me.

I caught it just in time to keep it from smashing onto the floor, and fingered it lovingly for a moment, seeing it through a blur of tears. "I can't take this," I demurred. "You've vowed to give it to your wife on her wedding night."

"Aye, so I have," he concurred gently. "Take it, I say, but don't wear it till we've been married."

"Till we've been married?" I stammered as my heart fluttered in my breast like a caged bird. I could have cried in sheer joy. Wasn't it just what I had wanted all along, and what I had fought and buried in the depths of my proud heart, out of fear that it would never come to pass, that it was but an impossible dream?

"Of course!" he was answering me. "You don't really think I'd cross the water again for a wife, when all along, like the treasure itself, she's been right here at Moondragon?"

"Nicholas!"

"Besides," he went on, "do you think my mother would ever let me hear the end of it if I gave her English grandchildren?"

"Is that why you're marrying me? Because of your mother?" I was damned if I'd make things *too* easy for him!

"No, my dear. I'm marrying you for your fine Irish temper. You don't think I could ever stand a dull moment again, do you, after all the adventures I've had with you? Flying inkpots, smashed doors, overturned decanters, secret passages, and ghosts! What better way to ensure myself the proper amount of torment than to marry a hellion like you? What fine rows we'll have of a long winter's evening, girl."

"Just be a good wench and promise not to throw the Ming porcelain at me, will you?"

As he spoke, I thought about marriage to Sir Nicholas Cheng. I thought, and as I thought, I could not help but smile to myself, for what he was saying was true. We'd fight and we'd argue, it was inevitable, but we'd love too, he and I, and we'd love well. Oh, yes, we'd love well. I smiled to myself as I watched his handsome, passionate face and that lithe, muscular body whose every line I desired so hungrily.

How funny it was. What a green goose of a girl I had been, despite my haughty, high opinion of myself. Lady Elizabeth had seen that I was right for him long ago.

"Nicholas loathes me," I had stated to her so definitely. "Do you think so, my dear?" she had replied, and gone on to say that I was the only woman who could say no to him. As if there was any attraction in *that*, I had thought at the time.

"Well, do you promise, Deirdre, my love?" he repeated with a smile. As if he didn't know!

I promised, just as I promised to wear the Dragon of the Moon on my wedding night. As a matter of fact, it was the only thing I did wear on my wedding night.

Epilogue

Sir Nicholas Cheng had said once that he would give his right arm and half the treasure to see his ancestress, the Lady Moon Pearl. As it turned out, fate decreed that he do just that, for the wound inflicted by Mrs. Ling with the ancient Chinese dagger grew morbid and led ultimately to the amputation of his arm. Not being one to feel sorry for himself or to lie down under life's blows—for didn't the Chengs lose well, and valiantly?—Nicholas never let the loss affect his mode of living or his great spirit. Rather, he laughed resignedly and purposefully fulfilled the rest of the bargain by bestowing many of the finest, most priceless, and historically important pieces of the Cheng treasure hoard upon the bewildered but grateful trustees of the Asiatic collection of the British Museum as the Cheng gift to the British nation. What future generations of Irish Chengs will have to say about that, as relations grow stormier between us and our English cousins over the water, I shudder to think upon, but nevertheless, Nicholas would have it so.

Perhaps he secretly still hopes for a peerage out of it, though the old queen has not seen fit to bestow one on him as yet. Hope springs eternal, etc.

Lady Elizabeth married her Dutch sea captain on the high seas, just as she had planned, mourned her brother Owen with suitable but philosophical lamentation, and then returned from China aboard the *Bantry* to settle down to being her happy captain's contented lady. The finding of the Cheng treasure permitted Nicholas the luxury of sentiment, and so he elected to keep the old clipper in service, although his two new steamers, *The Deirdre* and *The Lady Moon Pearl*, made her virtually obsolete. It matters not at all, however, for the Cheng fleet is still growing and will soon make a second fortune for the family, one of Nicholas' own devising.

Captain Vreeland, as I suspected, makes a good husband, a fine stepfather, and is a dear, good, lovable fellow all around.

Even Nicholas cannot grudge his mother's choice or deny that she is as well suited to her present life in her husband's snug house in Bantry town as she once was to her former one as mistress of Moondragon.

For her part, Lady Elizabeth—or plain Mrs. Vreeland, as she delights to be now—is a loving wife to her husband and a doting grandmother to the lively black-haired, dark-eyed little Chengs that Nicholas and I are dutifully supplying her with. She is, as well, an indulgent great-aunt to a brood of robust, towheaded, blue-eyed children belonging to Captain Vreeland's recently widowed nephew. A certain wistful gleam in her lively Welsh eyes tells me she sees an infusion of new blood in the offing for the Chengs of the rising generation. Who can say? Perhaps she is right. Only time will tell.

And if I have read the message of my Lady of the Dragon aright, I will have long ages of time in which to know.